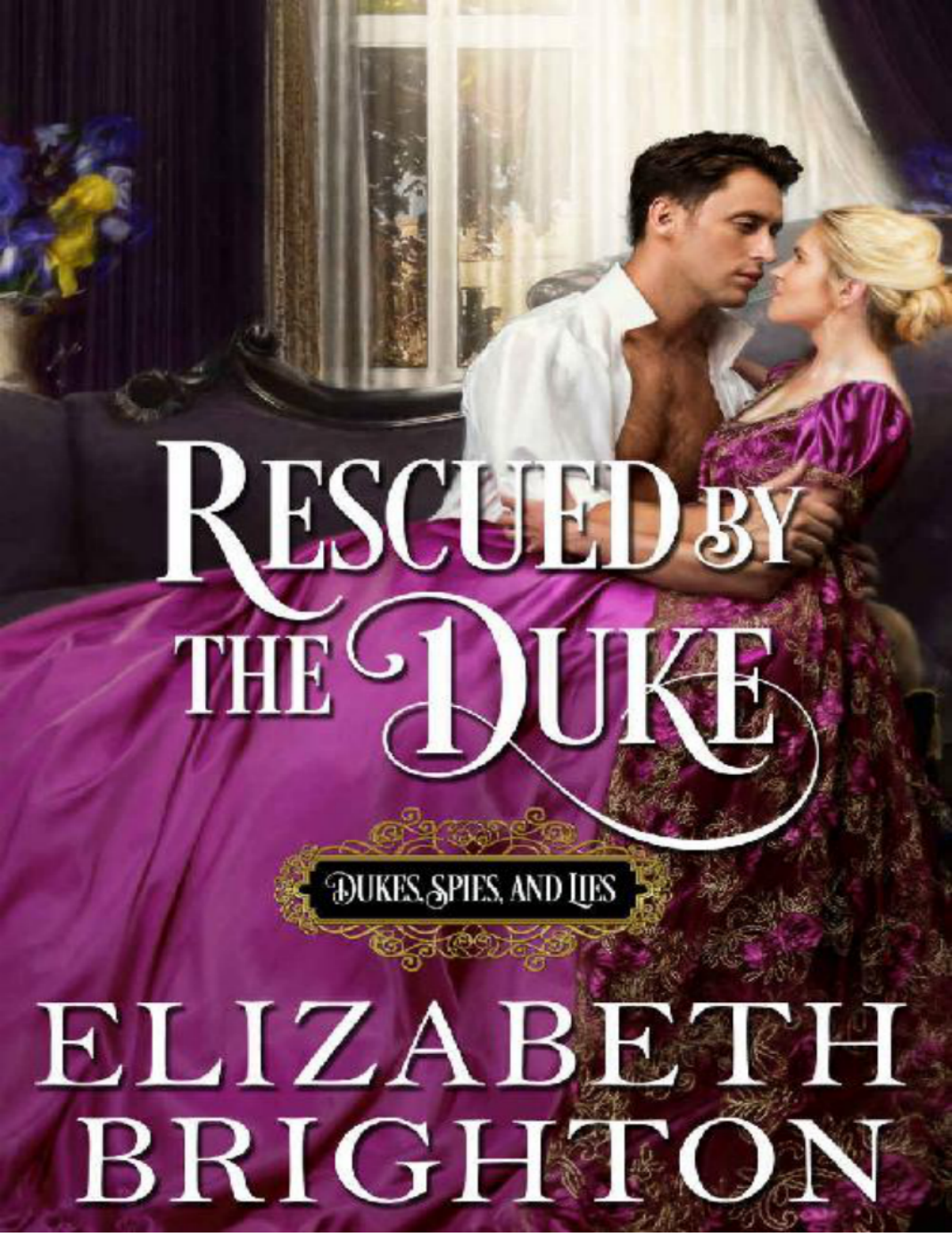

RESCUED BY THE DUKE
DUKES, SPIES, AND LIES
ELIZABETH BRIGHTON

Rescued by the Duke

Dukes, Spies, and Lies

Elizabeth Brighton

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Epilogue

Also by Elizabeth Brighton

Chapter 1

Lord Kane Vestra, seventh Duke of Erembour, stared across the sea of silk gowns, jeweled necks, and carefully coiffed hairstyles.

He narrowed his eyes, but ignoring his plight wouldn't make it go away.

He had to select one of these shallow nitwits as his wife and make her the Duchess of Erembour.

The task was as repulsive for him as it would be for her.

None of the insipid debutantes currently on display had the mettle to oversee the vast holdings of the Erembour duchy, nor did any of them inspire Kane to want to teach them.

But he had little choice.

He was home, and after all he had already given for king and country, this last bit was trivial.

He glanced over at his childhood rival, the Duke of Aegir, and the duke's younger sister. Tall and golden, Lord and Lady Vonne were the very epitome of English nobility and the model of attractiveness it demanded.

They were the rage of the ton and always had been.

Either would have their choice of spouse inside of a week if they made their wishes known.

The Duke of Aegir was everything Kane wasn't.

While Kane was taller than Lord Vonne, his dark hair and pale skin hinted of Kane's Irish ancestry.

Something all but unforgivable.

Unforgivable if not for his title and fortune that made every matchmaking momma quiver.

Well, most of them.

He grimaced as his gaze again fell to Duke Aegir's younger sister, Lady Aurora Vonne. Beautiful, intelligent, and kind, she should have married long ago. Most assumed she'd been waiting for her brother to return from the war on the Continent so he could give his blessing to one of the myriad of suitors clamoring for her hand.

But Kane knew better.

The foolish Duke Aegir was waiting for Lady Aurora to choose a

suitor she loved, one that would make her happy.

At least the young lady possessed the sense to reject all who had prostrated themselves at her feet so far.

But then, he doubted any would ever be worthy of her.

It simply wasn't possible.

He stared at the brightly colored peacocks strutting in front of her, but though she masked it well, he recognized her disinterest even if they didn't.

As it should be.

Few had little more to recommend them than a well tied cravat that their valet had most likely attended for them. They were so busy seeing and being seen that they did very little.

There were exceptions, of course, but few that were in the ballrooms.

And they were never considered fashionable.

Lord Benedict Carlton sauntered over to Lady Aurora, and Kane's hands balled into fists. The man was a peacock, but a well-loved one. A darling of the haute ton, he spent most of his time preening, gambling, and developing his notoriety as a rake.

Kane could not hear what was said, but lady Aurora's smile never wavered though Lord Benedict soon moved on to easier prey. Kane relaxed a little, though he cursed Lady Aurora's brother.

The Duke of Aegir should be doing more to protect his sister.

Even now, the man was too trusting, and a London ballroom was the last place you should trust anyone. Particularly the gathered males.

A damnable group, the lot of them.

Kane was ready to retire to his country estate and oversee his vast duchy. But he had one final task to attend to before he did so as it would be almost impossible to find a wife out at the ducal seat of Riverwood.

Lord Vestra swept his gaze across the gathered crowd, studying their expressions, their mannerisms, the subtle tilt of their eyes.

Years under his father's unintentional tutelage had taught him much about people, including how to understand what they said without words.

That had helped him rebuild all that his father had destroyed even more than Kane's sharp intellect and keen focus had.

Sometimes too focused.

He would seize on something, then obsess over it until he'd seen it through. It didn't matter if it was a new investment opportunity, a foreign operative, or a wife.

Kane had already served his duchy well, his single-mindedness in ferreting out the most profitable ventures having filled his coffers to

overflowing. Many raised a brow at his dealings with merchants and captains of industry, but they said nothing.

They knew better than to question him, and Kane kept it that way.

Then he'd served England.

Not as a frontline commander. That would have been a waste of his considerable talents. No, he had worked covertly and reported on troop movements, ship routes, and all the other secrets he'd uncovered.

And he'd uncovered many.

Including French operatives.

Then he'd used those operatives for his own ends. Sometimes without their knowledge, other times with it. There was always a way to break a man, and Kane knew all of them.

Had used most of them.

He'd also overseen a myriad of other clandestine assignments for king and country, all in the name of winning and bringing home as many English soldiers as possible.

It had been dangerous work, unforgiving work, and he had loved every moment of it. It had fully tapped his intelligence, his ruthlessness, his cunning, and it had never held him to society's unattainable standards.

But now he needed to secure a wife and sire the next Duke of Erembour. For that, he would have to conform to society's dictates of a gentleman.

He tried to convince himself it was no different than the half-dozen roles he had played on the Continent, but he saw through his own lie.

In France, he had known each role was transitory. One that he would occupy for a time, then move on.

One that wasn't him.

One he wasn't wearing to trick a woman into agreeing to marry him and bear his heir.

Lord Vestra glanced over at the Duke of Aegir, surrounded by a sea of bright silk skirts, and his gaze involuntarily slid to Lady Aurora again.

She lit up the ballroom like the sun itself, and it seemed every eligible gentleman in England had turned out to seek her light.

Kane wanted to poison them all.

But that would never do.

Nor would pining after a woman he couldn't have. Such a thing had broken his father, and Kane had learned many lessons from the old bastard. That was one of them, even if the previous Duke of Erembour hadn't intended to teach it.

Duke Aegir caught Kane's gaze on him and waved to him.

Before Kane could retreat, the damnable man was crossing the

ballroom with his sister.

"Quite the crush tonight," Duke Aegir said and dipped his head in greeting.

Kane did the same. "An understatement."

"Please allow me to present my sister, Lady Aurora Vonne. Lady Aurora, Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour."

She smiled and curtsied. "A pleasure, Your Grace."

"The pleasure is mine." The words came automatically, ingrained since boyhood, but it wasn't a lie. He bowed in return.

"You are not normally one for entertainments such as this," Duke Aegir said. "What brings you out tonight?"

A lie was on the tip of his tongue. So much easier than the truth, and after years behind enemy lines, second nature.

He stopped himself and opted for the truth, though he wasn't certain why. "I am in need of a wife."

"Not the best place to find one," Lady Aurora murmured.

He blinked at her. "Every eligible young lady in all of England appears to be here. Where else would a man find one?"

"Almack's is said to be the most ideal place, though I doubt that would suit you." Lady Aurora nodded toward the dance floor. "If there is a lady you already have in mind, this would be an event she would attend. Do you have such a lady in mind?"

Not one that would acquiesce to his suit. Kane shook his head. "Not as such, no."

"Then this would be a poor place to begin your search, especially for a man of your stature, Your Grace. As at Almack's, you will be a target for many, few of whom will be a good match for you."

Kane narrowed his eyes into an expression he knew was intimidating. "What do you know of a good match for me?"

"You will need a lady that can competently oversee the households in your holdings, which is no small task. She will need to be biddable enough to provide you an heir and a spare, but with enough steel in her spine not to run off screaming when you give her that look." Lady Aurora arched a brow at him. "Did I miss anything, Your Grace?"

"No." She had grown into an even more formidable young lady than she had been before he'd left for the Continent.

But even back then, she had not run from him when he had presented her with all manner of frogs and snakes. He still wasn't entirely certain why he had done such foolish things.

Perhaps he had wanted to frighten her. Or, perhaps he had merely wanted her to notice him.

Unusual for him either way.

Still, any man that married Lady Aurora Vonne would be lucky, though Kane could think of none that deserved her rare combination

of kindness, strength, and intelligence.

"My sister is helping me search for a bride," Lord Francis Vonne admitted. "I have been quite grateful for her assistance, and she has helped me avoid an unsavory situation or two."

"How is your search progressing?" Kane asked.

"She was right when she said I wouldn't have the chance to meet anyone tonight, but it was about being seen. Making an impression of my own so when there is a young lady I desire, that she will be receptive to my suit."

Kane stopped himself from rolling his eyes.

As if any young lady in all of England would be unreceptive to the suit of Lord Francis Vonne, the Duke of Aegir, darling of the ton with the fortune to match.

He was every mother's dream for her daughter.

And if the Duke of Aegir were so inclined, he could lure half the ladies of the ton to his bed.

But that wasn't the type of man Lord Francis was.

Which had caused Kane more than a little stress on the Continent when he had worked with Duke Aegir on several assignments. It would have been so much easier if he had been willing to use his charm and golden looks to lure women to his bed and to tease secrets from their lips.

But Kane had worked with what he'd been given.

Lady Aurora smiled up at her brother. "You should dance with Mrs. Merriweather, then we may retire whenever you wish."

"I shall enjoy dancing with our aunt. She is a delightful woman that I have not spoken much with since coming home." Duke Aegir swept his gaze over the crowd, then turned to Kane. "Would you stay with my sister and keep her safe?"

"I'm certain His Grace has more important things to do. I can see to myself, I assure you."

It was strange that Duke Aegir was asking him such a thing, but Kane ignored Lady Aurora's protests and dipped his head to Lord Francis. "You have my word."

Duke Aegir smiled, a bright and sunny expression that was the opposite of all Kane would ever be. "Thank you, Duke Erembour. I promise not to be long."

Lord Francis hurried off to find his matron aunt.

Lady Aurora watched him leave, a fond smile on her lips, then she turned to Kane. "I truly do not need your protection, Your Grace. I have been navigating ballrooms for some time now."

"Perhaps, but I gave your brother my word." And Kane did not want to leave her side. But he kept that to himself. "Do you think you will be able to find a young lady suitable for your brother?"

She did nothing so indelicate as shrug. Instead, she offered him a pretty, placid smile that said nothing and everything all once.

She would have been a good operative.

"I certainly hope to help him. While the same cannot be said of all gentlemen, my brother will be far happier wed and with a family of his own."

"And by all gentlemen, I assume you are referring to me?"

"Only you can answer that, Your Grace."

"We both know the answer, though I have a duty to fulfill. And your description of my needs was accurate."

"Even with your fortune and title, or, perhaps, because of them, you will be more difficult to find a match for than my brother."

"Are there really so few competent young ladies capable of bearing children?"

A smile teased her lips. "With the war reducing the number of available young men, you would expect there to be more. But a young lady of good breeding and the ability to meet that awful stare of yours without flinching? Those are rare."

But she had met his stare and smiled.

If only she wasn't Duke Aegir's sister and one of the most beautiful, well-dowered, and eligible women in all of England. And if only his father had not shown him exactly how dangerous she was to him.

"So I am intimidating," Kane mused.

"You know you are," Lady Aurora said. "You've cultivated the image. And while it may work for you in most things, it will be more difficult to secure a successful match."

"All I require-"

She held up her hand to stop him. "I heard your requirements. And you believe that's all you need. But you also need respect, perhaps even a degree of physical attractiveness."

"But not love?"

"I would not be so foolish as to ascribe that emotion to you, Your Grace."

His sinister smile returned. "You claim to know my needs rather well. Anyone that comes to mind that meets them all?"

"Perhaps one or two such young ladies, though neither are debutantes anymore."

"All the better."

Her gaze drifted across the ballroom. "My brother and I are attending Lady Langford's house party at the end of the month. Both young ladies in question will also be attending. I could make introductions then, though I will not tell you who they are until the end of the event."

"And why is that?"

“To prevent you from simply proposing to one or both of them to check wife off your list. It would be to your benefit and theirs to take a little time to become acquainted with them and determine if they are a good match.”

He stared at Lady Aurora Vonne. She knew him better than he’d suspected, possibly better than almost anyone else.

She smiled up at him, a lovely expression that warmed the room, and a hint of genuine mirth made her eyes sparkle. “There is my brother now. Perhaps I shall see you again at Lady Langford’s.”

Lady Aurora left his side to rejoin the Duke of Aegir, and Kane immediately missed her presence.

She sparkled like a thousand diamonds in a sea of paste jewels. But she was searching for love, and that was something he could never give.

Still, perhaps she could help him find a wife, and it would be an opportunity to see her again.

Chapter 2

Aurora pressed a hand to her stomach as she stared down at her correspondence.

She normally loved mornings. It was a time to organize her day, plan menus, and oversee the details of running her brother's household. Even when there were troubles, the warm sunlight in the morning room usually bolstered her spirits.

But the overcast sky matched her mood.

She smoothed her hands over the rich wood of her escritoire. A nervous habit, but one few would recognize as such,

How was it just learning the Duke of Erembour was attending the Langford house party had such an effect on her?

Ridiculous, but she couldn't focus on her tasks, nor could she find joy in her favorite pastime of reading.

Aurora stared at her lap and the book of fairy stories her brother had brought her back from France. She traced a finger over the dark-haired man with leathery wings.

A smile tugged on her lips as she imagined Lord Kane Vestra, seventh Duke of Erembour, as the demon corrupting so many of the characters in the book.

She flipped to the page with the golden angel that reminded her so much of her brother.

It was a thoughtful gift, and so like her brother to choose it. The book was one of the few things Francis had brought home with him from the Continent, and he'd brought it for her because he knew how much she liked books.

Aurora traced a finger over the elegant cover.

Her French was rusty, but the book appeared to be a series of children's tales. Tales unlike any she had ever heard. The elaborate illustrations were also unusual, and Aurora suspected the book had been handwritten and illustrated.

But it didn't seem old.

Quite the contrary.

The colors were still vibrant, as if they had been recently drawn.

She'd already read through it several times, and it was a lovely

diversion when her thoughts took unwanted turns.

Such as the way images of Duke Erembour distracted her.

A part of her wondered if Lord Vestra was considering her for his duchess.

Perhaps.

She was pretty enough, though most saw her refined manners, dowry, and family connections.

Lady Aurora Vonne was a diamond of the first water.

A prize to be caught.

A lady to be wooed.

Few saw beyond that to who she was or who they would actually be marrying.

Not that any of those things applied to Duke Erembour.

He would care little that others considered her a prize, nor would he care what others sought in her.

That was Duke Erembour. He simply didn't care about others and never had. He had been acquaintances with Francis long enough for her to be certain of that.

No, Lord Kane Vestra was searching for exactly what he had said. A partner that would oversee the domestic side of his empire and provide him heirs.

The lady in question didn't need a dowry of her own, and while family connections would be useful, there were few people of importance he didn't already know.

Particularly after his time on the Continent.

She still wasn't entirely certain what he had done in the war, but he had a chestful of medals. And more than that, Francis spoke highly of his service.

Aurora wasn't surprised.

When Lord Vestra decided to do something, he did not stop until he had succeeded completely and totally.

Like replenishing his family's coffers.

While his father had depleted them through a lifetime of grief, Lord Vestra had made it his mission to refill them. He had started while he was still at Eton with her brother, and the Erembour duchy was now considered one of the wealthiest and most prosperous in England.

He truly would have no issues finding a wife if that was all he wished.

But he didn't.

Aurora knew him well.

No, if he settled for a young woman simply because she could oversee his homes and provide him an heir and a spare, he would be unhappy. And if he was unhappy, Aurora could not imagine the lady

he married would ever find a moment's peace.

Lord Vestra was far too restless for that.

He was also not the type of man to take a mistress to soothe that urge.

Because a mistress wouldn't assuage it, either.

No, he had to marry well, and marrying well meant someone that would match his intellect as well as provide him heirs.

And someone that could stand up to that awful glare of his.

She bet he could bring grown men to their knees with that glare.

Aurora flipped back to the image of the black-haired man with leather wings. More fitting for Lord Vestra than it should be.

She blew out a breath.

She was being ridiculous.

A few moments at a ball and she could not banish the imperious Duke Erembour from her thoughts.

Strange.

She was usually far more in control of herself than that.

Simply because he had accepted an invitation to the Langford's house party did not mean anything more than he was listening to her advice.

He most certainly was not attending because of her, unless it was because she'd agreed to introduce him to a few young ladies that met his requirements.

And even if he were interested in her, Aurora would steer him elsewhere. She had helped several gentlemen who'd thought they wanted her find much more suitable matches. All of whom were quite happy with their choices, as were the ladies they had married.

Though, in Erembour's case, it would be much more difficult to find him a suitable match.

To find a young lady that would be happy with him as her husband and that would ignore his intimidating glare rather than flee from it.

And the young lady had to be someone Duke Erembour would respect, if not love. Because if he did not respect his wife, her life would be quite unpleasant.

Duke Erembour didn't see that, didn't understand it, but Aurora did.

While there were very few that had the mettle to stand up to him, Aurora knew two that could. Miss Spencer and Lady Pemberley. They were both equipped with good sense and intelligence, too.

Miss Spencer had endured a great deal with the death of her siblings and her father's drinking, but the events had strengthened her rather than broken her. She would be a good duchess, a good mother, and she could stand up to the Duke of Erembour's most intimidating

glare.

Not that it was an ideal match for her, but it was better than other prospects she had.

Lady Pemberley had three large, overbearing older brothers. It would take a lot more than a frightening look to scare her. And all three of her brothers would see to it that Duke Erembour treated their sister well.

Not that Lady Pemberley would need such brotherly interference.

She had been keeping all three of her brothers in line since they'd been children.

Miss Spencer and Lady Pemberley were two of Aurora's closest friends, and she didn't want to saddle either of them with a man as difficult as Duke Erembour.

But both met his criteria, neither had any current prospects, and if they could endure him, it would make them a duchess. That would secure either Miss Spencer or Lady Pemberley's future and ensure an excellent duchess for the Erembour estates.

Though it would mean she would see far less of her friend as Duke Erembour was unlikely to spend much time in London.

Still, once he had his heirs, perhaps Miss Spencer or Lady Pemberley would spend the Season in London without him.

Aurora swallowed at the thought.

She wouldn't tell either of her friends or Duke Erembour what she had planned. Rather, she would introduce them and see how things progressed. Better that way than trying to force something that wasn't there.

And, if neither Miss Spencer nor Lady Pemberley liked him, Aurora would consider the fresh crop of debutantes launching at the start of the new Season.

The sooner the dratted man married and retired back out to his estates, the better.

Duke Erembour was the only gentleman to ever unnerve Aurora, to make her stomach clench in a most disagreeable way, and then occupy her thoughts when she rather he didn't.

The sooner he went on his way, the better.

He was a difficult person and had given her brother no end of difficulty during their years at Eton.

And Lord Vestra had gifted her frogs, pulled her hair, and teased her when she had gone to visit to her brother.

He'd been a rather horrible boy that had grown into an equal horrible man.

But despite that, Aurora supposed the challenge Duke Erembour provided her brother had forced Francis to try harder. Had pushed him to reach a potential he might not otherwise have met.

Not that it mattered.

Lord Kane Vestra was a thorn that needed to be sent back to his ducal seat. And that would be accomplished once he was married.

Aurora wondered again what Lord Kane Vestra had done to earn the medals and military commendations she heard paired with his name.

She blew out a breath and reorganized her thoughts.

She was done wasting time on the man. While he unsettled her, she could avoid him.

And she had so much to be thankful for. Her brother had come home safe.

The war had taken a toll on him, as it had all young men, but Francis still smiled and laughed. She sensed a darkness that hadn't been there before, but time would help heal him.

So would a family.

While she might never have one for herself, her brother wanted one. Needed one. And she would help him find the perfect young lady.

Someone that would make him laugh. Give him the family he so desperately needed. And that would bring him all the happiness he deserved.

The Langford house party would give her the perfect opportunity to see how he responded to a few prospects in a quieter setting.

The Langfords were an old and respected family, and while there would be quite a few people there, it would not be the crush of the London ballrooms.

Still, she and Francis would not stay long.

With the Season winding down and the weather warming, Francis would need to head out to their family estate to oversee the lands and tenants. Even the independent farmers would rely on what he did with the Aegir lands to guide them.

Francis had also been discussing a handful of other ventures, such as steel mills and shipping. Most likely because he had been talking with Duke Erembour again.

Dratted man.

Aurora sucked in a deep breath and unclenched her fists. She needed to oversee the packing for the trip out to the Langford estate and make certain the London house was prepared for the quieter summer months while she and Francis were out at the country estate.

And she needed to clear her head of dark-haired man with leather wings.

Setting aside the French fairy stories, Aurora hummed to herself as she swept through the London house and listed out everything that needed to be done before they left.

"Ah, Aurora, there you are," her brother called to her.

Aurora smiled as she glided into the front parlor, then halted and dropped into a curtsey as the very man she'd been trying to avoid stood in her family's home. "Your Grace."

Duke Erembour inclined his head to her.

"Lord Vestra and I were just discussing a few things. Would you be so kind as to pour tea for us?"

"Of course," she murmured, and sent for both tea and coffee, remembering that Duke Erembour did not care for tea, even if her brother had forgotten.

His Grace also didn't like biscuits, though why she remembered such a thing she couldn't fathom.

Still, she sent for some savory finger sandwiches to accompany the usual biscuits, then sat beside her brother as she waited for the staff to wheel in the tea service.

"I do not wish to intrude, but I did need to speak with you about something rather urgent," Lord Vestra said.

"Of course." Francis waved for him to continue.

Duke Erembour's gaze strayed to Aurora for a moment, as if deciding whether he should say it in front of her or not. He dipped his head. "Three officers from your unit have disappeared over the last eighteen days."

Francis frowned and leaned back in his seat. "Disappeared?"

"It is possible the incidents are unrelated, but I do not believe in coincidences."

"And you are usually correct," Francis murmured.

Aurora wasn't certain what they were talking about. Perhaps their days back in Eton. Still, it was strange that Lord Vestra was bringing this news to her brother.

How did the duke know what had happened?

"Take appropriate precautions for both you and Lady Aurora." Duke Erembour's gaze fell on her, the intensity of it all but pinning her to her chair.

Aurora refused to fidget. "We both thank you for your concern, Your Grace."

The left side of his mouth quirked, but before he could say more, the tea service arrived. Aurora rose, and both gentlemen followed suit. She set out the coffee and tea, then poured a cup for each of them.

Francis sipped his and smiled, but Duke Erembour paused a moment as he stared down at the dark, bitter brew, then back up at her.

Aurora ignored his intense gaze as she organized the biscuits and sandwiches before setting them out for the gentlemen.

Francis grinned up at her as he popped a biscuit into his mouth. "Is this a new recipe?"

“New to us, yes. Miss Spencer was kind enough to share it.”

Duke Erembour glanced at the biscuits, then over at the small sandwiches. He took one of the sandwiches and ate it. “These are surprisingly good.”

“I will pass on your compliments to the staff.”

“Few ever think to serve anything other than tepid tea and too-sweet biscuits. I applaud your ingenuity.”

Aurora wasn’t certain if Duke Erembour was complementing her or taunting her, but either way, she didn’t like the way her stomach twisted.

Or the way she wanted it to be a compliment.

“Have you decided to attend to the Langford’s house party?” Francis asked.

Lord Vestra’s cold green gaze landed on her. “Lady Aurora did suggest it as the best course of action, and she even offered to help me find a duchess.”

She’d only offered to introduce him to a couple of potential young ladies.

And only to get rid of him.

But she masked her thoughts behind her pretty and polite smile.

“You must ride with us,” Francis said. “It’s a long trip from London, and it would be safer if we went together. It would also give us time to speak more of the steel mills we were discussing earlier.”

Oh no, her brother couldn’t possibly be inviting this horrible, unsettling man to ride with them all the way to the Langford’s.

Aurora put on her prettiest smile and gazed up at her brother. “I am certain Duke Erembour would much prefer to travel on his own. As you said, it’s a long journey. I doubt he would want us as companions for so long.”

She was giving Lord Vestra the perfect opportunity to escape, but the dratted man only fixed her with his serpentine gaze.

“It is a long journey, and I appreciate the offer. It shall pass much more quickly with such engaging company.” Duke Erembour smiled, but there was no mirth in it.

Aurora said nothing as she maintained her polite society façade.

She suddenly very much wanted to know what the Duke of Erembour’s game was.

With a man like him, she was certain there was a game.

And she was certain she wouldn’t like it.

Chapter 3

Kane stared down at the pile of documents littering his desk. He wasn't certain why he'd accepted the Duke of Aegir's invitation to ride with him and his sister to the Langford estate other than to discomfit Lady Aurora.

A poor reason to do anything, yet Kane could hardly deny it.

At least to himself.

All the stranger that he should want to unsettle Lady Aurora after her kindness of serving him coffee and spiced sandwiches rather than the usual tepid water poured over dead leaves and biscuits sweet enough to give a man a tooth ache.

Yet, she'd served the tepid water and too-sweet biscuits to her brother. That meant she didn't serve coffee and sandwiches as a matter of course, but she had remembered he didn't care for them and had accommodated his tastes.

The idea unnerved him.

He couldn't remember a time in his life when anyone had considered his preferences, much less catered to them.

He wondered which of his other preferences she would enjoy.

Kane blinked and shook himself.

He absolutely was not considering such things with Lady Aurora Vonne, the beautiful and charming sister of the Duke of Aegir. She was sunlight and rainbows, the very epitome of English high society.

She was not the type you tumbled into bed and took like a common whore.

There was nothing common about her and never had been.

He could not remember a single time when she had ever been anything other than the personification of elegance and grace. Not even when she had still been in the schoolroom.

Not even when he had handed her a frog to see what she'd do.

And she was most certainly not the type of lady that endured a man like him, even if she had danced with him once before he had left for the Continent.

His time in France had changed him in many ways, but Kane still had still not taken a lover once since returning home.

Easier to ignore that part of himself.

And marriage among the English aristocracy was not designed to satisfy those needs, anyway. Lady Aurora would be like every other English lady and share her husband's bed long enough to conceive an heir and a spare.

After that, gentlemen took mistresses to see to such needs.

At least, that's what his father had always told him.

And his father hadn't even bothered to sire a spare. But then Kane's mother had died in childbirth with him.

His father should have remarried but hadn't.

Another way the old man had failed.

But then, Kane's father had been afflicted with the Vestra curse, and Kane had never known him before it had set in.

It was a curse Kane was trying to avoid at all costs, one his father had warned him about in both word and deed.

And one he tempted the longer he spent with the Duke of Aegir and Lady Aurora.

Kane clasped his hands behind his back.

Perhaps he should call off the entire venture. Not just riding with Duke Aegir, but the entire Langford house party and the whole finding a wife boondoggle.

But he hadn't run the estates, overseen the investments, and served England to watch the Erembour coffers emptied and his family lands wrung dry by his wastrel of a second cousin who would inherit if he didn't produce an heir.

No, everything he'd done, everything he'd sacrificed, would be for something.

And Kane did not back down from a fight.

He would find a wife, even if it meant accepting help from Lady Aurora to find the right wife.

His eyes narrowed, and a hint of a smirk tugged his lips.

In a way, he was rather looking forward to the challenge.

Something coiled in his stomach.

A warning, though he didn't know what it was warning him about. Still, he'd learned to trust such instinctual reactions.

Perhaps he underestimated the dangers of finding a wife.

That was possible.

Marrying the wrong woman, or in his father's case, the right woman, had nearly destroyed him. For a man like the late Duke Erembour to be laid low by such a thing… Kane rocked back on his heels.

It would not do to underestimate the search.

Yet, his needs were not complicated.

Whatever the case, he accepted that he faced danger, though he

could not determine what it was or the direction it would strike from. That made it difficult to mitigate and bothered him more than that he faced danger at all.

Kane paced the room as he considered and reconsidered the issue.

Perhaps the source of his internal warning was his reluctance to leave London with everything that was happening. Though he was no longer in His Majesty's service, three officers from the Duke of Aegir's unit had disappeared. All of them experienced combatants, and all of them under mysterious circumstances.

While he may dislike the sunny Lord Francis Vonne, it would never do for someone to kill the man.

It would deprive England of a capable and competent leader, and Kane didn't have to like the Duke of Aegir to respect him.

There was a reason they had been rivals most of their lives.

Part of it had been because of their fathers, but more than that, it was because Kane had never been able to annihilate that rival.

Irritating.

But perhaps if he was able to win the heart of his rival's sister…

Kane shook his head at the notion.

Lady Aurora was a not a prize.

She was a beautiful, intelligent, and kind woman with the sense to serve him coffee instead of tea. Any man would be lucky to have her as his wife.

The coil in his stomach tightened.

There was the danger.

He still wasn't certain why, but if he was journeying with the Duke of Aegir and Lady Aurora, he would need to prepare.

~

"Why did he invite that dratted man?" Aurora mumbled under her breath as she oversaw the last of the bags.

"You do not care for Duke Erembour?" Lord Francis asked.

Aurora pressed a hand to her chest. Her brother walked on cats' feet since returning home from France. "I didn't say that."

"Nor did you have to. Has he done something to upset you? While I do not wish to cause you any discomfort, he is quite an interesting traveling companion. And if there is something unsavory happening, he is a good man to have on your side."

"Are you so certain he's not using you for some nefarious end or another?"

Lord Francis smiled. “He is a good man, though I do not know if even he realizes it.”

“He tormented you all through school.”

“Not as much as Father made it out to be. I suspect the rivalry was more between Father and Duke Erembour than it ever was between Lord Vestra and myself. But none of that matters. Lord Vestra proved himself repeatedly, and if not for him, I would not be standing here today.”

Aurora frowned. “You wouldn’t?”

“I fear I have said too much. I do hope you can find him a wife that will make him happy. He deserves that, even if he does not always believe he does.”

Her brother squeezed her shoulder, then turned and waved over a footman to check on the progress of loading the carriages.

Aurora stared after her brother.

More had happened in France than he was telling her, and she was suddenly very curious exactly what Lord Vestra had been doing the past several years when he hadn’t been in England.

But such questions would have to wait for another time.

Aurora checked her lists for the third time, making certain everything they would need for the trip to the Langford’s was ready. They would not be returning to London until after the harvests in the fall.

Possibly not until the start of the next Season.

Aurora grimaced.

While she enjoyed spending time in London with her friends, she was growing bored of the balls, the luncheons, and must especially of the musicales. When she went to the theater with Francis, she wanted to watch the play, not the other people. She still enjoyed time socializing, but she appreciated small, select gatherings for tea rather than the crush of ballrooms.

Though she did like to dance.

A smile teased her lips as she remembered the one time she’d convinced Lord Vestra to dance. He’d almost been flustered, and while he’d been a passable dancer at best, it was the one dance she remembered above all others.

She sucked in a breath and chastised herself.

What a horrible person she was that the one dance she’d most enjoyed had discomfited someone else. She clearly needed to dance more often, but that would have to wait until the Langford’s.

And she was certain Duke Erembour would not want to dance with her again.

Aurora ignored the fleeting disappointment and warned herself she was becoming far too vain. Not everyone wanted to dance with her.

Fixing that firmly in her mind, Aurora focused on their travel preparations.

Chapter 4

As Aurora's brother had promised, the conversation on the long carriage ride to the Langford estate was interesting. Rather than trading the usual on-dits and society gossip, her brother and Duke Erembour discussed things ranging from the latest in land management to topics currently under consideration by the House of Lords.

While Francis brought her into the conversation on several occasions, Duke Erembour did not bother.

Typical.

She was female, so he assumed she hadn't a though in her head other than what fabric she would need for a new gown in the latest style.

Few gentlemen appreciated all that went into running vast households or the myriad of other things that had to be overseen while they had been fighting the French.

Aurora did not trust stewards and barristers to have her or Francis's best interests at heart. Not unless she was watching them, questioning them, making certain they explained all they were doing and why to her satisfaction.

Even then, she double-checked them. Pitted her own logic against theirs when she hadn't believed them. But she'd hidden it behind a pretty smile, delicate fan, and lies that the advice had come from the fathers of her friends.

Much easier that way than to convince most men to listen to her on such topics.

The Duke of Erembour appeared to be no different.

Thank goodness he was not her problem and never would be.

Lady Violet Pemberley was not the right match for him, nor was Miss Liliana Spencer, though Liliana could handle such things better.

While Aurora wanted more for them, both of her friends had resigned themselves to typical society matches and enduring men such as Duke Erembour. They both met all his other criteria, so either young lady would still be a reasonable choice.

Assuming either of them wanted him.

They could both find more amenable gentlemen, even if they lacked the title and wealth of His Grace.

And both Violet and Liliana would have to marry sooner or later. Their fathers had not been as open-minded as her own.

The previous Duke of Aegir had watched the daughters of several of his close friends struggle because of foolish choices their husbands had made, and he'd vowed Aurora would never be in the same predicament.

It was then he'd started building the intricate web of trusts that controlled the lion's share of her dowry. Trusts that named her the beneficiary, and that had been invested well enough that they provided a very generous annual income.

And that annual income was a big reason she was such a desirable match.

Being the only sibling of the Duke of Aegir didn't hurt either.

The connections that came with that were almost as enticing as the pounds, more so to those that had wealth but lacked the proper blood lines.

And her lady's maid ensured she was always gowned in the most fashionable dresses with her hair done to match. Few bothered to look beyond those basic traits to the person she was.

At least no gentlemen did.

Aurora had made peace with it and had given up on finding a suitor long ago.

She was content to be left on the shelf.

She had several good friends and would tend those friendships even after the others married and had children of their own. And she hoped her brother married a woman who was kind to him and who would welcome an aunt to assist with any children they might have.

"Something has brought a smile to your lips," Duke Erembour murmured.

"It's of no consequence."

"It is to me."

His intense green gaze fixed on her, and for a moment, Aurora considered telling him the truth. Instead, she dipped her head and offered a trivial bit of gossip.

"You do not wish to tell me. A pity. I would like to know what earns smiles from you."

"And what would you do with such information, Your Grace?" Aurora asked.

"Perhaps use it draw more smiles from you."

"Doubtful, as I do not think you are much interested in smiles from anyone, myself included."

Lord Vestra leaned back, an almost sinister expression darkening

his features. “And that is where you would be wrong, Lady Aurora.”

Francis waved away Duke Erembour’s odd behavior. “Please stop trying to unnerve my sister. We are home now, and there is no need to intimidate everyone we meet. Besides, best to start practicing your manners now if you are going to make a good impression on a future wife.”

Duke Erembour said nothing, but his piercing gaze still held her.

Aurora met it and arched a brow.

She would not allow him to intimidate her.

Once you backed down to man like Lord Kane Vestra, you never stopped. Aurora had no intention of following such a path with him now or ever.

Rather than dissuade him from whatever had been going through his mind, her arched brow had the opposite effect as the edges of his lips quirked almost into a smile.

~

Kane enjoyed the ride to the Langford estate far more than he should have and was almost disappointed when they arrived. A member of the Langford staff showed him to his rooms so he could wash away the travel stains and properly dress for the afternoon.

His room at the Langford’s home was well-appointed with a charming view of the gardens.

It was all he expected from English aristocracy.

Stuffy. Bland. And old.

Everything he should be for someone like Lady Aurora Vonne, and nothing he was.

Kane raked a hand through his hair and immediately regretted it. He would not allow himself to appear flustered in any way.

Still, he should not have been needling the Duke of Aegir’s beautiful and charming sister, but she had responded in such unexpected ways. She hadn’t shrunk from him, nor had he once been able to ruffle her composure.

A most intriguing woman.

It was a pity he was there seeking a bride. He would have liked to spend more time with her, though she had agreed to aide him in his search for a suitable lady. Perhaps that would provide him with the opportunity to better understand what made her smile.

Not that he wanted to make her smile.

Kane paused.

That was a lie, and he did not lie to himself. Others, yes, but never himself.

He narrowed his eyes.

A dangerous path, one his interest in Lady Aurora was drawing him toward.

That would never do.

Lady Aurora may be insightful, interesting, and intelligent, but those were not things he was searching for in a wife. He needed a biddable young woman with enough intellect to oversee his vast household and the ability to provide him with heirs.

Nothing more.

Certainly not a young woman that was versed in classic literature as well as the latest happenings in the House of Lords.

Down that path led ruin.

For him.

The Vestra curse, the same one that had felled his father.

Kane's father had loved his wife, and when she'd died, it had broken him.

And she'd died giving birth to Kane.

His father had never remarried, and on the old duke's darkest days, he hadn't been able to hide his hatred for the son that had stolen the woman he'd loved.

Kane would not allow himself to fall down such a dangerous path.

Would not allow the Vestra curse to claim him.

He would also not lie to himself.

While he hated the old duke, Kane would not deny that he shared many of his sire's traits. Traits that had made him exceptionally successful. Both in building a fortune, and later, in serving England.

But those traits would be his undoing if he was not careful when selecting a bride.

And Lady Aurora would never do.

She may have been able to oversee the entire Aegir duchy in her brother's absence, but her competence was not why he was rejecting a match with her.

Not that she would ever accept a proposal from him.

Lady Aurora had a line of young swains clamoring for her hand, and if she wanted none of them, she had the beauty, wealth and connections that allowed her to all but beckon the man she wanted as a husband.

So why hadn't she?

The thought made Kane pause.

According to Francis, it was because she hadn't yet fallen in love.

Such poppycock.

People at their level of society did not marry for love, unless you

were a foolish old duke, as his father had been.

Lady Aurora was not foolish, at least he didn't think her to be. And he was seldom wrong when it came to people.

He reordered his thoughts.

Such thinking brought him no closer to his goal.

He intended to find a bride before the end of summer so he could focus on the myriad of other things commanding his attention.

And among them were the missing soldiers from Duke Aegir's unit.

Something was wrong there.

Very wrong.

Three officers did not simply disappear in such a short period of time without someone or something orchestrating it.

Kane needed to know what it was, which was ostensibly the reason he had even sought out Duke Aegir. Something had happened, something recently, and Kane was certain the duke was at the center of it.

Though what the "it" was Kane did not yet know.

But he would.

Before Lord Francis was targeted.

Though a wise assailant would have targeted the Duke of Aegir first.

But it was easy to underestimate Lord Francis Vonne.

Whether the Duke of Aegir cultivated that image intentionally or it was just part of who he was, Kane still wasn't certain, but it had frequently made him the target of foreign agents.

People that planned to use his sunny guilelessness against England, only to discover too late that it had been turned against them.

Kane knew that too well.

He had used it to England's advantage several times.

At the moment, Kane needed time to discuss things with Lord Francis. To learn all that had happened from the time the Duke of Aegir had left France until now. To discover if anything unusual had happened recently.

Kane had planned to do that on the carriage ride, but he'd allowed Lady Aurora to distract him.

She was dangerous.

Very dangerous.

It was a good thing she hadn't been a French agent.

Pushing the thoughts aside, Kane prepared for luncheon and the attendant entertainments the afternoon promised.

He had three goals.

To learn anything the Duke of Aegir knew that could lead to understanding the disappearances.

Locate a suitable wife.

And earn a smile from Lady Aurora.
Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter 5

Aurora strolled through the gardens with Lady Violet Pemberley and Miss Liliana Spencer. It was refreshing to be out of London and away from the more formal strictures of society. But more than that, Aurora enjoyed the fresh air, sunshine, and good company.

If only her friends could also be done with the marriage mart, she would enjoy their time together even more.

Again, she silently thanked her father for his gift of freedom.

"How was the ride down?" Miss Liliana asked.

The glance she exchanged with Lady Violet warned Aurora her two bosom bows were up to mischief.

"It was tolerable," Aurora answered, measuring each of her words as carefully as she would if she were speaking to a powerful dowager.

Lady Violet dropped her hands to her hips. "You were in a carriage for hours upon hours with one of the most powerful and reclusive men in all of England, and all you can say of it was that it was 'tolerable'?"

"I would be happy to introduce you to him," Aurora said, keeping her words light.

"Oh, no," Lady Violet shook her head violently enough that her pretty curls bobbed. "He is the worst sort of cad."

"I thought that was reserved for Lord Erik Gautin," Aurora said dryly.

"Oh, he's not the worst sort," Lady Violet assured her. "He's a charming rake and nothing more. You get exactly what he promises with that one."

"Which is ruin?" Miss Liliana asked.

"If you are a young, unmarried lady, yes," Lady Violet agreed. "He is for the more mature set, those who've made appropriate society marriages and are now searching for some excitement."

Aurora lifted a brow. "What do you know of such excitement?"

"Alas, very little," Lady Violet confessed. "But there must be something to it or so many young ladies would not be marrying in such a hurry."

Aurora stared at her friend. "Your brothers better marry you off soon."

“Please don’t give them any more ideas.”

“All right, but please do not going around telling people the Duke of Erembour is a cad. It is already going to be difficult enough for him find a wife.”

“Maybe not a cad,” Lady Violet mussed. “Duke Erembour lures you in with his dark good looks and brooding demeanor. Makes you think he has the heart of a poet, when it’s really just the heart of a pirate.”

“Lady Violet!”

She lifted her dainty shoulders. “If half of what my brothers have told me about him is true, being called a pirate is kind.”

“Handsome as Satan with a heart just as dark?” Miss Liliana asked.

“Isn’t that the way it always is?” Lady Violet lamented.

Aurora wanted to ask what Lady Violet’s brothers had told her, but now was not the time. Best to keep any interest she had buried, particularly from her two dearest friends.

“What did you discuss on the carriage ride here? Fire and brimstone?” Miss Liliana asked.

“Far more mundane topics,” Aurora assured them, and briefly outlined several topics of conversation.

“More interesting than what my brothers talked about.” Lady Violet pulled a face.

She had three large and overbearing brothers. While Aurora had occasionally been jealous of Lady Violet having such a large family, her brothers could be so protective as to be domineering.

It surprised Aurora how someone as petite as Lady Violet could have three brothers built like locomotives, but the family resemblance was unmistakable.

“Perhaps you should allow me to introduce you to Duke Erembour then,” Aurora said. “At least the conversation would be interesting.”

Miss Liliana and Lady Violet exchanged another glance.

Aurora narrowed her eyes. “You weren’t trying to play matchmaker with me and a man you just said had the heart of Satan, were you?”

“It was Lady Violet’s idea,” Miss Liliana murmured.

“Well, no one else has appealed to you. Gentlemen, rakes, and pirates need not apply. We thought maybe Satan himself could tempt you.”

“I am quite happy without marrying.”

Violet blew out a breath. “Liliana and I have no choice but to marry.”

“So you thought you’d drag me along with you?”

“It’s not ‘dragging’ you if you consent to it.” Lady Violet humphed. “And he is sinfully handsome in that quiet, restrained way. If you could make him lose control, just for a moment, how delicious would

that be?"

"For a young lady who is supposed to be so sheltered, you have a remarkable imagination," Miss Liliana said dryly.

"I have three brothers. Large, older brothers." Lady Violet arched a brow. "I need a good imagination. It's all I've been allowed."

Aurora turned her gaze to Liliana. "And here I was hoping one of you two would be interested in Duke Erembour."

"Not me." Liliana shook her head. "I want a nice, quiet marriage with a kind gentleman. There is nothing nice or quiet about His Grace."

"You haven't even danced with him."

"I don't need to." Liliana patted Aurora's hand. "There has to be someone you don't like that you can set up with him."

"Would have to be someone you dislike," Lady Violet said. "Anyone you set up with him won't be friends with you anymore."

"You were going to set me up with him!"

"Because you can keep him in his place," Lady Violet said. "No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't walk all over you. You would be saving the rest of us from him."

Aurora rolled her eyes. "He is not that bad."

"Because you are you," Lady Violet said sweetly.

"Enough talk of such things," Aurora said. "How is Captain Pemberley doing?"

Lady Violet blew out a breath. "He is so busy trying to protect me that he won't let me help him. But I think he's getting better. He's not up roaming the halls at night like he used to, and he's eating again."

"It will take time," Aurora said. "My brother told me many similar stories of men having difficulty adjusting now that they're home."

"Do they end well?" Lady Violet asked, her voice catching on the words.

"They do when they have someone as wonderful as you looking out for them," Aurora promised.

"I hope so." Lady Violet pressed her lips together then turned the conversation toward some of the intriguing things her youngest brother had written about on his recent excursion to India.

"Sounds like he enjoys traveling," Liliana said.

Lady Violet wrinkled her pretty little nose. "He does. Momma worries he is going to turn into a merchant, or heaven forbid, marry a girl who isn't English."

All three of them mock-fainted at the suggestion.

"But at least if she's fussing over him, she isn't fussing over me," Violet said.

The three girls laughed.

"I am glad to see that you all recovered from the trip out here so

well," Duke Erembour said. His words were soft but cut through their laughter.

Both Liliana and Violet froze beside her, and Aurora cursed Duke Erembour.

He was never going to find any but the most desperate of ladies willing to wed him if he insisted on terrifying them.

And even if the lady agreed, it would not be a match that would make him or the lady happy.

"Duke Erembour, a pleasure," Aurora curtsied to him and offered her hand.

His manners asserted themselves as he bowed stiffly over it. "And you, Lady Aurora."

"Please allow me to present Lady Violet Pemberley and Miss Liliana Spencer."

He dipped his head in greeting, but his cool stare was enough to freeze ice.

"I had better check on my brother, make certain he is adjusting. It's his first gathering like this since coming home. Please excuse me, Your Grace." Lady Violet curtsied, linked her arm with Liliana's, and the two all but sprinted out of the gardens.

Duke Erembour raised a brow. "Acquaintances of yours?"

"Yes, and you managed to terrify both of them. Particularly unusual as Lady Pemberley has three very imposing brothers."

"Terrifying them was not my intent."

Aurora dropped her hands to her hips. "Then you should not sneak up on people, particularly young ladies."

"I will consider that advice in the future."

Aurora blew out a breath, but she couldn't get the Biblical comparisons out of her head. She almost expected him to offer her an apple. "If you are going to find a wife, you need to work on being less terrifying and more approachable."

He frowned, an expression that darkened his entire demeanor and sent a chill through her. "I do not know what you mean."

"Of course not." She resisted rolling her eyes. "When you are first introduced, rather than a barely contained sneer, you could try a gallant bow and charming smile."

"Like this?" He smiled, and the expression was truly chilling.

Aurora suppressed a shudder as she met his gaze. "Not like that at all. Forget gallant. I'll settle for not imposing."

His gaze turned to the path Lady Pemberley and Miss Spencer had taken. "Perhaps they are silly girls and easily frightened."

"As I said, Lady Pemberley has three imposing brothers. I don't think a pirate would frighten her." Though Satan himself might, but Aurora kept that to herself.

“You are not frightened of me.”

Even if she were, she wouldn’t dare show it. “It does not matter if I am frightened or not, Your Grace. You are searching for a wife, so you mustn’t scare away every potential match.”

He stared at her, the silencing stretching between them. While it discomfited her, she allowed nothing to show other than her pretty placid smile.

“I am not suited to this endeavor.”

“Few are,” Aurora said. “But it is the game we must play to find a spouse, and even if you found a chatelaine to oversee your households, you still need a wife to provide heirs.”

Lord Kane stiffened beside her, but he dipped his head. “You are correct.”

“And a man like you wants options. While you have the wealth and title that would make most matchmaking mommas flock to you, one glance at that smile and all but the most intrepid or desperate will flee. You desire neither a social climber nor a woman who marries you out of desperation.”

“Not a very flattering choice.”

“We just have to give you the heart of a poet,” Aurora said.

Duke Erembour narrowed his eyes at her. “I do not write poetry and have never been accused of being romantic or fanciful.”

“So you’ll memorize pretty words someone else wrote. I’m guessing you have learned sections of your favorite Shakespearean plays.”

“*Hamlet* was always a favorite.”

“You are not going to quote *Hamlet* to a young lady,” Aurora snapped.

“But you have read it.”

“It’s a very unhappy story.”

“Much of human experience is an unhappy story.”

“If we choose it to be. I don’t choose it to be.”

He stared at her a long moment, then offered her his arm. “Tell me more of your thoughts on Hamlet.”

“Only if you promise to practice appearing less intimidating. After dinner this evening, there will be various entertainments. That will be an ideal time to meet several young ladies and their families.”

“Their families?” Duke Erembour scowled.

“When you marry, you will also be joining your family with hers. It’s important that you don’t despise them, even if you do plan to spend the majority of your time out at your country estates.”

“I am not certain I do. There is much that keeps me in London.” He turned and guided her down the path. “Now, I am interested to hear your take on Ophelia.”

Aurora laughed and followed. He was hopeless.

It very well might come down to him settling for a young lady in desperate circumstances.

Still, she hoped someone would speak of Hamlet that night at supper. While it was not a subject to lure many young ladies, Duke Erembour appeared far less frightening when he spoke about a topic that intrigued him.

He could even be engaging.

She just prayed no one asked his opinion on anything they expected a polite answer to, and she said an extra prayer that no one made him smile.

After all, he needed some chance of securing a wife.

Chapter 6

Duke Erembour could conjure a half-dozen Shakespearean curses for the dinner seating arrangements. He was quite certain their hostess held him in particularly low regard, given those she'd seated beside him.

Kane had no desire to use any of the lessons Lady Aurora had given him on their walk. He much preferred his normal tactics of cutting sarcasm and intimidation.

Which worked remarkably well to silence inane chatter.

He glanced down the table several times to glimpse Aurora's golden hair gleaming in the candlelight as she chatted with those seated beside her, among them Lord Benedict Carlton and Lord Erik Gautin, the Earl of Marquardt.

Yes, the hostess truly detested him.

Lord Benedict was a sycophant and dandy, and Lord Erik was a known rake with a reputation that made ladies blush and men envious.

Both men should have been sent out to sleep with the dogs rather than sitting beside Lady Aurora.

Kane's mood darkened as he endured course after course, eating little and tasting less. By the time the ladies retired to the drawing room and port was being served, he was ready to be done with the entire farce.

If a noble lady did not wish to be his wife, he could marry a merchant's daughter. Though Lady Aurora was correct when she said you married a woman's family as well as the woman.

Then he would find an orphan somewhere that would like to be a duchess.

He could always employ a chatelaine to oversee his households. There tended to be matron aunts and unwed sisters in need of such positions.

He glanced down the table to where Lady Aurora had sat.

No, she would never need such a position.

Her father had provided for her, made certain that she would always be cared for even if she never married.

Or if she married, and the gentlemen turned into a spendthrift or worse.

Kane had heard whispers that her large dowry was held in a series of trusts that made it virtually impossible for any future husband to take it from her. Furthermore, even the generous annual annuity was wrapped up in her name.

He stared at the other gentlemen sipping their port.

Some of them still accomplished things, but many more were about seeing and being seen.

Times were changing, and the new era would leave men like that behind.

A truth evidenced by how many of the landed aristocracy were already selecting brides as much for their dowries as their beauty or family connections.

One of the young men at the table recommended a game of billiards before retiring into the drawing room with the ladies. The young man had seen only a handful fewer years than Kane had, yet Kane felt so much older.

War did that to you, he reminded himself.

The young lordling had probably never ended a single life.

Kane had ended scores.

He did not belong here among polite company. He never had.

Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour, left his port untouched as he retreated outside to enjoy the cool air, walk, and think.

~

Aurora chatted with several acquaintances before joining Lady Violet and Miss Liliana. She enjoyed the time to catch up with her two bosom bows in person rather than through letters.

A part of her wanted things to go back to how they had been before any of them had endured their first Season.

Back when they'd all been in London and had seen each other often without the pressure of so many watching them.

But that would never come to pass again.

Even after both of her friends were married, they would be out in the country with their families. And if they weren't, they would be in the city with their families.

Aurora couldn't decide if her friends would follow the way of the aristocracy and allow nannies and nurses to rear their children, which seemed cruel compared to her own childhood, or if they would be

devoted to their children if not their husband.

It didn't matter, Aurora reminded herself.

They would still be her friends, and Aurora would make new friends. She also had her brother's home to oversee until he married.

A part of her would miss having children and a family of her own, but another part of her would miss her freedom more.

While it would be nice to have someone to lean on, to share worries with, that did not describe most men of her class.

Few marriages among the nobility provided even basic companionship.

Gentlemen had their mistresses for such things, and ladies had their friends, mothers, and sisters. Some also took lovers, though they had to be far more discreet.

None of it sounded even remotely appealing.

"That's the fourth time you've glanced at the doorway," Lady Violet informed her. "That anxious for your brother to join us after a glass of port?"

"I suppose I must be," Aurora murmured, though it wasn't her brother she'd been searching for.

Miss Liliana smiled. "He will have no trouble securing a bride from a good family with an appropriate dowry."

Aurora waved it away. "I care little other than she is kind to him and makes him happy. He deserves that."

"It's what we all want," Liliana whispered.

"Maybe not all of us." Violet nodded to the darkened gardens. "Tall, dark and scary is out prowling. Probably searching for his next victim."

"What kind of books are you reading?" Aurora demanded.

"Ones my brothers wouldn't approve of." Lady Violet lifted her petite shoulders. "Perhaps you should go check on him and lead him back to the light."

Aurora rolled her eyes.

Duke Erembour was a grown man capable of making choices. If he didn't wish to engage in the usual courtship rites, he would find it more difficult to find a bride, but not impossible.

He had wealth and a title.

Someone would marry him.

Although who that someone was would most likely not be someone that made him happy. But that may not be what he sought.

Many gentlemen simply needed a wife to bear them heirs.

Aurora was again jealous of what her parents had enjoyed. They had truly loved each other, and each had smiled when the other entered the room in a way that Aurora wished someone would smile at her.

But no one ever had, and she doubted they ever would.

Few saw past her pretty and polished exterior. She was the ideal of a duke's daughter.

But then few bothered to look.

And no gentleman had ever asked her before about her views on Ophelia.

Strange, but she wanted them to ask her, wanted to learn their thoughts on the tragic figure of a woman facing her demise by doing nothing more than obeying the very men who were supposed to protect her.

Aurora's gaze drifted to the windows overlooking the gardens as she allowed herself to get caught up in the general conversation of the room.

However, once Francis returned with the other gentlemen, Aurora told him where the Duke of Erembour had gone.

"You are worried about him," Francis said. It was a statement, not a question.

"It's odd that he's out there while the rest of us are in here."

"It's because he's worried about the disappearance of several officers over the past few weeks. He is most likely searching for anything amiss on the Langford property to ensure all of our safety."

Aurora blinked up at her brother. "He knows how to do that?"

"There are many things we learned in France that are not fit to discuss in a drawing room. Particularly Duke Erembour, though his teachings saved my life more than once." Her brother's gaze slid to the windows. "I will find him and bring him back."

"It will be easier for me to help him find a wife in a bright drawing room than the shadows of the gardens."

"Even if he doesn't seek a wife, he's given enough. He needs to come back from the shadows."

Aurora started to ask another question, but her brother squeezed her fingers and headed out into the darkness.

Chapter 7

Kane heard Duke Aegir approach. The duke had never excelled at stealth, but that had been useful in itself.

While Kane could elude Lord Francis, the young duke was nothing if not relentless. And his sunny optimism had inspired many to follow him, despite insurmountable odds. Of all the disparaging things Kane thought of the other man, he had to admit that Duke Aegir had always led his men well.

Of more pressing concern, the longer the young duke remained apart from the others, the more likely it was to draw attention, and that was something Kane did not wish to endure.

He stepped from the shadows and allowed the Duke of Aegir to see him.

"There you are."

"You should be inside enjoying the adoration of society."

"I came out to check on you. Aurora was worried."

Kane blinked twice, both surprised that Lady Aurora was concerned for him and strangely pleased. "I did not mean to worry her."

"Then come back inside. She'll feel better if you do, and it'll be a lot easier for you to find a wife if you actually meet the young ladies."

"I have decided to forgo this charade of finding a wife," Kane said.

"Is that why you were out here walking? You always walk when you are thinking."

So Duke Aegir had noticed that. He was remarkably perceptive, but so easy to underestimate. Even Kane made the mistake on occasion.

"I was considering my alternatives."

"What alternative is there to marriage?" Duke Aegir asked.

"I did not say an alternative to marriage. Perhaps a different route than taking a society wife. I could marry an orphan and hire a chatelaine to oversee my households."

"So marry a woman too terrified to ever stand up to you, then hire another to manage your households?"

"Crassly stated, but essentially the gist of my plan."

“I suppose it will provide you with what you think you need, but I believe it to be a mistake.”

Kane was not ready to underestimate Duke Aegir again. “Not that I asked your opinion, but why do you think it a mistake?”

“Because you are going about all of this with your head instead of your heart.”

“I have no heart.”

“So you say. Going that route, you would use your wife for little more than an heir. Not that there is anything wrong with orphans, but it is doubtful that they will be able to read much less discuss Shakespeare with you or mock the poet Mr. Shelley with you.”

Kane bristled. He had underestimated Duke Aegir. Again. “I would require neither from a wife.”

“Maybe not, but having it would make the whole affair far more enjoyable. We have to marry, but it doesn’t have to be unpleasant.”

“Have you found someone not unpleasant?”

“I have met many ladies that it would not be unpleasant to share my life with, but I have not yet met the right one. The one I want to spend the rest of my life with.” Duke Aegir smiled. “I understand the pressure you are under to secure your legacy, to make certain all you have worked for does not fall to the wrong person. Even so, I do not think your logical and expeditious route is the right one.”

“I will consider what you have said.”

“It is all I can ask. That, and for you to come back inside with me so Lady Aurora will stop worrying.”

“You are a devoted brother,” Kane said wryly.

“It is easy when you have a sister as amazing as mine.”

“What makes your sister so special?”

Duke Aegir smiled, his affection unfeigned. “She is intelligent, kind and brave. You have heard her speak of Shakespeare, and she stands up for what is right, even when it is not what the dowagers would like to hear from a young lady. More than that, she has always been there for me. When I first came home from France and wanted to lock myself away, she sat beside me for as long as it took.”

There had been no one waiting for Kane when he’d returned home. He hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but Captain Pemberley and Duke Aegir both had been blessed.

“I shall give it some further consideration,” Kane said.

“Excellent, in the meantime, let’s head back inside.”

Duke Aegir would not be easily dissuaded. Whether he did it out of friendship or for his sister’s sake, Kane couldn’t be certain.

Better to retreat now than be forced to make a stand he’d rather not.

Kane followed Lord Francis back to the gathering, and while many

eyes were drawn to the golden duke beside him, Kane allowed himself to imagine the radiant smile gracing Aurora's lips also included him.

He would do a great deal to earn that smile, more than was wise.

Even give her another frog. Or dance with her.

The thought struck him.

That made her dangerous, very dangerous, though he didn't yet understand why.

But he'd confirmed what his instincts had been warning him about. He was in danger, and now he recognized the source.

Chapter 8

Duke Erembour and her brother rejoined the group, and Aurora let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She was more worried about Duke Erembour's ominous warnings that she wanted to admit.

At least, that's what she told herself.

Still, three missing officers were a grave concern, and a dark garden was no place to be while they were still trying to solve what had happened.

As Francis led Duke Erembour over to where Aurora was seated, Lady Violet hid a grimace behind her fan.

"I hear my brothers calling me."

"You would be a duchess," Aurora murmured.

"I would be miserable. Not only would he be terrible to live with, but he's the type that would expect you to live with him. And to stay faithful to your wedding vows."

Aurora blinked at her friend. "You are already planning your infidelity?"

"I will be lucky to like my husband."

"That's sad."

"That's the reality for most of us. But I am determined not to fear my husband, so please pardon us." Lady Violet made her polite excuses, linked arms with Miss Liliana, and slipped across the drawing room.

Duke Erembour's gaze followed her for a moment as he took her seat beside Aurora while Francis took Liliana's seat.

"She does not like me," Duke Erembour murmured.

"A pity," Aurora said. "I had hoped with her three large and terrifying older brothers that she would be a good match for you. Or at least that you wouldn't frighten her away with a single smile."

"I am not sure I have smiled at her."

"Please don't."

"Perhaps you will tell me more about the young ladies gathered here and their families."

"Do you really want to find a wife, or are you simply using me as

reconnaissance for some other purpose?"

Duke Erembour lifted his intense green gaze to meet hers. "Perhaps both."

Aurora narrowed her eyes at him, but his lips only quirked. "You are a very difficult man."

"I have been called worse."

She could believe that. Still, she hoped she could focus him on his search for a wife. Help him find someone so that he would marry and go back to whatever it was he was doing before he'd walked into her front parlor.

She nodded toward one of the young debutantes and her family and told Lord Kane Vestra what she knew about them.

~

It was still early when Aurora retired for the evening. But it had been a long journey out to the Langford's, and she had slept poorly at the inn the previous night. She hoped she would sleep better that evening.

Aurora was aware of the hijinks that occurred at house parties, though young, unwed ladies were typically excluded.

Still, she locked her door and her window as she did every night.

Despite how many guests attended the Langford's event, Aurora's exalted position permitted her a room to herself that adjoined with Francis's. A part of her wished her station would've allowed her to share a room with Liliana and Violet. It would have been more fun even if would have been less comfortable.

Aurora trailed a hand over her bed pane.

She wasn't entirely certain it would be less comfortable.

She hadn't shared a bed with anyone since childhood when her nurse had slept beside her after a bad dream. It had been soothing then, though she doubted an evening with Violet would ever be soothing.

Her bosom bow would be up half the night talking.

A smile crept over Aurora's lips. She could only imagine the trouble Violet would discover if not for her three brothers, one who was always tasked with watching her.

She doubted any of Violet's brothers would be able to marry until they had her settled.

Or at least married.

Aurora doubted her friend would ever truly settle into a quiet life.

Aurora worried a great deal more for Liliana. Her father wanted her married quickly, and Aurora had a few suspicions as to why. Liliana's father was terrible with money, and it was quite possible that those he owed would come to collect soon. That could mean Liliana losing what meager dowry she had.

It was terribly unfair.

Liliana was clever and had kept her family out of ruin despite her father's drinking and gambling. Drinking that had worsened after her younger brother's death in France and her older brother had succumbed to dysentery.

Aurora would find someone for Liliana. Someone kind and gentle that would shower Liliana with the adoration she deserved.

But she still hadn't found that someone.

Blowing out a breath, Aurora picked up the book of children's fairy stories her brother had gifted her and sat down on her bed. She traced a finger over the elegant cover and flipped open to one of the stories.

She studied the image of the red-haired boy.

Almost none of the stories in the book had a happy ending, but then, most children's stories didn't. This was another tale where it appeared as if the boy in the story had been lured by the false promises of the blank-winged demon.

She started down at the image that repeated throughout the book and wondered if it was a regional legend from a distant part of France. Perhaps when she and Francis returned to London, she would try to learn more.

Aurora flipped to a story of a young boy lost at sea when a rustle at her window drew her attention. She set aside her book and rolled her eyes. It seemed as if the room assignments had either changed at the last minute or if a gentleman had imbibed a bit too much and gotten lost.

She would need to deal with it before she could sleep peacefully.

Walking to her balcony, Aurora prepared to gently but firmly send away whichever gentleman had mistakenly come to her room.

A muttered curse and rough words warned her whoever was outside was not someone of her class.

And they were close, far closer than they should be from a second-story window.

She stumbled back and pressed her hand to her chest. Her heart beat so fast she swore she could feel it through her ribcage.

She had nothing in her room of value, nothing worth stealing, and there were far grander treasures in the Langford's home.

Perhaps she had misheard.

She was exhausted after the long ride…

Aurora shook herself.

No.

One thing her brother had taught her was to trust herself. If she feared a gentleman, there was a reason. If she was looking over her shoulder on a crowded street while shopping, she needed to return to the carriage or stay in one shop for an extended period.

If she should trust those instincts, she should definitely trust her ears.

Aurora sprinted to the door that separated her room from her brother's. She rapped loudly and prayed that Francis would hear her. She waited a beat, then another as her gaze strayed back to her window.

Perhaps she should flee into the hallway, though that could cause scandal on its own as an unaccompanied young lady in the middle of the night.

Her brain sorted through a dozen possibilities. If Francis didn't answer, was it better to face the certain censure of society or the uncertain fate that would be bestowed on her by whoever lurked outside of her window?

Swallowing her dread, Aurora lifted her hand to knock again when Francis opened the door that separated their rooms.

He slept less soundly than he once had.

"Is everything all right?" Francis asked her as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"I was up reading when I heard something outside my window. I thought it was someone with the wrong room, but when I heard the cursing…" She glanced back over her shoulder, half expecting the glass to shatter at any moment.

Her brother didn't question her.

Instead, he grabbed the fireplace poker and crept over to the window. He silently slipped back the curtains and stared outside. After what felt like an eternity but couldn't have been more than a few minutes, he allowed the curtain to slide back into place.

"There was someone there. I swear it," Aurora whispered.

"Your room is not safe tonight. Come. You shall sleep in mine."

He plucked a blanket and pillow from her bed, then led her to his room.

"Did you see anyone out there?" Aurora asked.

"Yes. They were attempting to climb the trellis under your window, which is not strong enough to take their weight. They were searching for another way up when they saw me and ran."

"Did they say anything?" Aurora asked. "Perhaps…"

"I want to believe that they had the wrong room, but they ran through the gardens toward the trees rather than back toward the house."

Aurora shuddered despite herself. “It makes no sense. There is nothing of value in this room.”

“Other than you,” Francis murmured.

She shook her head. “I’m sure it’s nothing more than someone with the wrong room, and we’re both letting Duke Erembour get to us with talk about these missing officers.”

“If it were about the missing officers, then the villain would have been at my window rather than yours. I fear someone is trying to force you into an unhappy marriage.”

Aurora winced at the admission, but the person outside of her window had not been a gentleman. She doubted that was it.

“I will check more thoroughly in the morning.” Francis dropped the pillow onto the chaise, then motioned to his bed. “Whoever it was, I would prefer you not to be alone. Please, get some rest. The culprit is gone, and there is nothing more we can safely do tonight.”

Aurora did as he asked and pulled the blankets up to her chin. She listened as her brother’s breathing fell into the steady cadence of sleep.

Even with the comforting sound, she was still awake when the sun pinked the horizon.

~

Aurora blinked as the sun pressed against her eyelids. She must have fallen asleep at some point, though she wasn’t sure when. Glancing over at the chaise, she confirmed what her ears told her.

Francis had already left.

She glanced at the door between their rooms, and a shiver slid down her spine. She was not ready to go back to hers alone just yet.

Instead, Aurora rang for her lady’s maid, then sat on the edge of her bed and combed her fingers through her hair. It was an anxious habit, but she was not feeling brave that morning.

She still wasn’t certain if she wanted Francis to find something more than a gentleman’s footprints beneath her window, or if she hoped he didn’t.

Either way would make sleeping difficult for the next week, and she was already on edge.

Perhaps she should leave the Langford’s early and return home.

Her departure did not mean that Francis needed to leave, and he would have ample opportunities to introduce her to any young lady that had earned his attention.

He might even have an easier time if she wasn't there.

And she was making excuses.

Aurora lifted her fingers to her hair again, then snapped them back to her side.

Yes, she was afraid of whoever had been beneath her window the previous night, but Francis was alerted to the situation. He'd keep her safe. So what was causing her such emotional chaos?

Someone rapped sharply on the door, and before Aurora could say a word, Duke Erembour strode through. "You were correct-"

He stopped and stared at her.

Color flamed over Aurora's cheeks as she realized what a mess she appeared. Her hair was sleep-tumbled, she wore nothing but her nightgown, and her feet were bare. She slipped them up onto the bed and hid them under the fabric of her nightgown.

Duke Erembour blinked. "I am sorry. I have the wrong room."

She was too embarrassed to even enjoy his rare apology. "This is Francis's room. I… someone tried to enter my room last night, and…"

Duke Erembour bowed to her. "If you see him, please tell him I was searching for him."

"Of course, Your Grace." The words had barely left her when he was turning on his heel and striding out of Francis's room.

Aurora blew out a breath and waited for the floor to open and consume her to hide her embarrassment. She flopped back on the bed and pulled a pillow over her head.

She would never be able to face Duke Erembour again.

The emotional chaos within her intensified into a full-blown gale.

~

By all that was holy, Kane needed a long swim in a cold lake.

He ran a hand through his hair and engaged in all his mental tricks to focus his mind, but he could not banish the image of Aurora in bed, her golden hair cascading around her as the morning sun haloed behind her.

It had taken all his willpower not to lay her back on that bed. Not to strip off her nightgown and feast his senses on her naked and spread out before him.

His body responded to the unbidden images, and Kane growled several expletives.

This was not how he'd wanted to start the morning.

He'd planned to ignore Duke Aegir's advice and leave the

Langford's house that morning. He'd then select his chatelaine first, as that would be the role requiring the most care. Almost any healthy young woman would do for the other.

Particularly if she had golden hair and…

Kane silenced the thoughts.

That would have to wait.

So it appeared the help the Duke of Aegir had requested related to his sister. If it was any other young lady, Kane would have ignored it and ascribed the entire event to Aurora's imagination.

But it wasn't.

It was Lady Aurora.

And there were already three missing officers.

In this case, it might be an over-eager young man that had gotten the wrong room.

Maybe.

Striding out of the manor, Kane quickly ascertained which windows led to her rooms and which to Duke Aegir's.

He studied the stone of the manor, the ground, and the path near Duke Aegir's window, but there was nothing to discover.

He paused at Lady Aurora's and crouched down as he stared at the soft soil. The hint of a footprint. No more than a partial outline of a boot, but discernible. There should be more, a lot more given the rain, but there wasn't.

That meant whoever it was had tried to cover his tracks and had done a good job of it.

But not good enough to hide it from Kane.

He narrowed his eyes as he examined the hint of a boot print.

Someone could have meant to join Lady Aurora in the night, then used it to force her hand in marriage, though Kane doubted it.

The Langfords were an old and respected family. This was not the place for such tomfoolery, especially given the select guests they'd invited.

And the fact that Lady Aurora had fled to her brother warned that she had not invited whoever it was to her room.

Kane's thoughts wandered again to whoever had abducted or killed the other three men from Duke Aegir's command.

Was it possible they had changed their game from second and third sons to a duke? Unlikely, yet he didn't know what their game was or their end objective. It was also possible that they were planning to go through Lady Aurora to get what they wanted from Duke Aegir.

Kane balled his hands into fists.

He would not let them hurt Lady Aurora.

"Ah, there you are," Duke Aegir called out. "Did you discover anything out by the tree line?"

Kane waited for Duke Aegir to catch up to him, then dropped his voice. “Your sister was correct. Someone was under her window last night.”

“So you figured out it was her.”

“Who else would turn to you in the middle of the night?” Kane asked, not ready to reveal he had walked in on Lady Aurora. That alone would be enough for Duke Aegir to push for Kane to marry her, and Kane would not subject her to that.

“Yes, it was Aurora. I do not doubt her for a moment, but to think someone would try something so bold at the Langfords…” Lord Francis shook his head.

Kane did not correct him.

That had been his first thought, too, and it still might be correct. But the boot print was wrong. He needed to do more investigating, but it did not have the shape of a Hessian. He suspected it was a workman’s boot.

Which meant it could belong to a gardener.

Or it could not.

“I should take her home,” Duke Aegir said. “She has not been herself this week, and she’ll feel better back in familiar surroundings.”

Kane considered where the Aegir seat was located, how large it was, and how easy it would be to target the duke or his sister there. “I am not certain that is the safest path for you or her.”

“You’re still worried about the missing officers.”

“Even more so now.” Kane glanced at the trellis leading up to Lady Aurora’s window and silently thanked the gardener for allowing it to decay over the seasons.

While it appeared sturdy, there was no way it would hold a man’s weight. That might be the only thing that had saved Lady Aurora.

“You’re worried about a long carriage ride.”

“Yes.” And Kane wanted to keep Lady Aurora there. With him. Why, he didn’t know, but he didn’t challenge the notion.

“If Aurora is helping you find a wife, you would be spending a great deal of time with her.”

“Yes,” Kane answered slowly, not certain where Duke Aegir was headed with this line of thought.

Lord Vonne grinned. “You have reconsidered!”

“For the moment.” Whatever it took to keep Lady Aurora safe, and that meant keeping her close. That was the only thing Kane was certain of.

“Very well, then we will stay. I know I can trust you.”

Kane was less certain of that, but he didn’t correct Duke Aegir.

“If you are not with Aurora, then I will be. Between the two of us, we should be able to protect her while we figure out who the dastard

was beneath her window and what he wanted."

Kane would lock her in Riverwood Manor before he'd allow anyone to hurt her. The thought surprised him, but he didn't deny it. "The main group is going on a hunting expedition today."

Duke Aegir stared off into the distance. "I have done enough hunting for three lifetimes."

It was a sentiment many home from France shared, even Kane, though he doubted the killing would ever end even if he no longer had a part in it. "Perhaps you and your sister can arrange for some light-hearted diversion here, and we will make note of who stays behind."

"Excellent idea. I will see if she is awake. She had a bit of a rough night." Duke Aegir turned and walked off to find his sister.

Kane swallowed hard as images of Lady Aurora with her hair tumbling around her shoulders assaulted him. He would check on her later, when she would be surrounded by people and he could be more certain of his actions.

And after he'd had a swim in a cold lake.

Chapter 9

Aurora mentioned nothing of what had happened the previous night to either Liliana or Violet. A part of her wondered if she'd dreamed it, and Francis was simply being kind to her. Still, when it was announced that the group would hunt that day, Aurora was relieved when Francis opted to stay behind with her.

She was less pleased when Duke Erembour also decided to remain behind, but then a hunt was not a good place for him to demonstrate his gentlemanly skills. She imagined all sorts of ways that Duke Erembour would take down his prey, each more graphic than the last.

Aurora shuddered.

No, a hunt was definitely not going to help his reputation.

Neither Violet nor Liliana were interested in joining, but they attended anyway to appease their families.

"We are going to stay to the back of the group," Lady Violet promised. "Are you certain you won't join us?"

"Yes, quite," Aurora said.

"Are you feeling all right?" Miss Liliana asked. "You look a little pale."

"I didn't sleep well last night," Aurora confessed. "Too much excitement, perhaps."

"All the more reason for you to stay and rest." Liliana touched Aurora's shoulder. "Please, take care of yourself."

Aurora remembered the brother Liliana had lost and hugged her friend. "I will. I promise. And this will give you two the opportunity to observe many of the young gentlemen without my input, see if their marksmanship sways your opinion of them."

Lady Violet winked. "If nothing else, all those strong young men riding gallantly on horseback will be an enjoyable sight to behold."

Liliana rolled her eyes as she linked arms with Violet. "I will keep an eye on her for you."

"Thank you." Aurora hugged each of them, then watched as they disappeared through the garden to join the gathering group.

Aurora blew out a breath and tipped her head back to watch the clouds scamper across the sky. She was exhausted from the sleepless

night, but more than that, she was exhausted from fighting society's expectations of her.

If she wasn't certain that Francis would accompany her after the happenings of the previous night, she would retire back to the Aegir seat.

It was quiet out there, and while everyone knew she was the sister of the Duke of Aegir, it mattered a lot less than it did in London or at society events. The local ladies wanted to see her happily married, as did the London set, but there was a great deal less pressure.

She thought of Violet's brother and his voyages to America and India.

They had no dukes and duchesses in America.

No princes or kings.

The concept was bizarre, yet strangely intriguing.

But she had no more of a place there than she did in London.

Aurora wasn't certain where her place was. What she truly wanted beyond seeing her brother happy.

Maybe she understood Ophelia better than she suspected.

"Tell me who has brought such sadness to you, and I will end them myself."

Aurora startled as she stared up at Duke Erembour. He stood casually at the end of the path, but there was nothing casual about him.

Her heart thumped in her chest, but she wasn't certain if it was from fear or happiness.

Fear, it had to be fear. After the strange man beneath her window the night before, she was still jumpy.

Though, oddly, she felt safe with Duke Erembour.

Well, maybe not safe, but protected. He would never allow harm to come to her.

"A pleasure to see you this morning, Your Grace," Aurora murmured and curtsied.

"The pleasure is mine."

He sounded like he meant it, and Aurora blinked at him as he crossed the distance to her. Duke Erembour offered her his arm, and Aurora accepted it. Her fingers trembled as she laid them on his sleeve, and she cursed herself.

Duke Erembour laid his hand over hers, steadying her without saying a word.

"I am sorry for whatever happened last night."

Aurora stared at the ground. "Francis told you."

"Your brother enlisted my aide to track down the culprit. It was not simply a gentleman that came to the wrong room."

Aurora tightened her hold on his arm as she remembered the

rough curses she'd heard. "How can you be so certain?"

"The footprints under your window were created by a workman's boots, not a gentleman's. Also, anyone planning to engage in a clandestine liaison could easily learn that there are several far easier and less visible routes into guest rooms. I did in less than a day."

Aurora pressed her free hand to her chest. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"It wasn't meant to."

"Perhaps it would be best if I returned home."

"Of that, I am less certain."

Cold coiled in her stomach and spread into her limbs. "What do you mean?"

"Three men from under your brother's command have gone missing in the past month. I believe they were related, and I believe this is part of the same pattern."

"But why my room?" Her words were barely a whisper.

"Either they confused the two rooms, or yours was easier to access. I am uncertain as I do not know their goal."

Aurora couldn't suppress her shudder, and Duke Erembour slid his arm around her. He was hard, strong, and unyielding against her. She shouldn't have found comfort in it, but she did, just as she felt as if she could share burdens with him.

That his shoulders were strong enough to accept the extra weight.

It was a strange thought, and she shook herself. "I'm sorry."

"Given the circumstances, a more subdued response than most would have."

A weak smile curved her lips. "Crying and wailing will hardly solve any issues, if that's what you were expecting."

"Not from you, no."

Aurora wasn't certain what that meant, and it was best not to read too much into it. Still, his words spun through her head. "They're after Francis."

"Most probably."

Her fear faded under a wave of fury. "They can't have him. I won't let them. We'll go to America if we have to."

"I don't think you will need to do anything so drastic, though your ducal seat is not safe. London will not be any safer."

Aurora steadied her thoughts. "They followed him out to Langford House."

"Yes."

"Why? What do they want?"

"If we knew that, we would have a much better idea who they are. Your brother is speaking to the grooms and several other servants this morning in hopes of enticing information out of them."

“But not you?”

Duke Erembour smiled, an expression that made her shudder and her stomach tighten. “I can always strike fear into them later.”

“With so many guests, I doubt they noticed much.”

“Most probable,” Duke Erembour said. “But it is still an avenue worth exploring.”

“And with how many guests are here, it will be difficult for Francis and me to change rooms.”

“Agreed, which is why I am suggesting that you and your brother join me at Riverwood.”

“That’s the Erembour ducal seat,” Aurora murmured.

“Precisely. I do not entertain often, and when I do, my staff is exceptionally discreet. Security at the manor is excellent, and any unusual guests in the surrounding villages will be instantly noticed.”

“I… that is very generous. I didn’t think you and my brother got along well.”

Duke Erembour lifted his shoulders. “I do not take well to someone hunting down those who served England. We will ferret them out and destroy them.”

While his words terrified her, they also comforted her. Lord Erembour was competent and meticulous. If he said he would see her brother safe, then he would.

“What will we tell society?”

“We need to tell them nothing.”

She chuckled. “If you tell them nothing, then they will speculate. Better to control the story.”

He raised a brow, but he didn’t disagree with her.

“Perhaps there can be a joint project that the two of you are working on together. While he’s working with you, I would not have a proper escort and would need to return home.”

“That seems drastic and unwise.”

It was her turn to raise a brow at him.

“We still aren’t certain that the villains did not target your room intentionally. Many are familiar with how much your brother cares for you, and you could be a means to him.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Still, it will be difficult to explain why I am accompanying him to Riverwood.” There was an explanation, one every dowager in the ton would conclude and smirk.

They wanted Aurora married almost as much as they wanted the Duke of Erembour leg-shackled.

“If we are controlling the narrative, there is a rather simple explanation.”

Dratted man.

Of course there was, and of course he knew it.

“While that will do nothing to harm your reputation, it could destroy mine,” Aurora said.

Duke Erembour raised a brow. “I thought you weren’t marrying.”

“That doesn’t matter. I still wish to be welcomed in ballrooms and drawing rooms.”

“Assuming anyone would be so foolish as to earn your or your brother’s ire, you rejecting my suit would be seen as the most obvious outcome. Most would assume I have something compromising on your brother for him to even consider it.”

“That’s not true.”

Duke Erembour’s lips quirked. “I am well aware of what people think of me, but it has its uses, even if one of those uses is not securing a bride.”

“You mean mother of your heirs.”

He spread his hands in front of him. “You sound like your brother.”

“Good. It means he has sense. Marriage is about more than the siring of children, though we seem to have forgotten that in our race to be civilized.”

“And what does it mean to you?” Duke Erembour asked.

“Children are part of it, certainly, but there is so much more. You are binding yourself to another until death. There should be more to it than simple procreation.”

“Some would say procreation is not so simple.”

Color touched her cheeks. “The act itself seems rather basic, though we wrap it up in enough social mores to make it anything but. Still, a proper young lady should not even be thinking such things, much less discussing them.”

Lord Kane Vestra dipped his head, and the edges of his lips threatened a smile. “Perhaps there is more to marriage for some. But that has not been the history of the Erembour line.”

“There is always a first.”

“I will save that for the Aegir family. In the meantime, let us do what we must to keep the Aegir family alive.”

Aurora wasn’t certain why he was helping, but he was too powerful of an ally to turn away. “Thank you. What do we do next?”

Kane stared across the gardens. “You need to do very little. I will attempt to act the besotted fool to make the invitation seem genuine. Once out at Riverwood, we set the trap for those stalking your brother.”

“And if there isn’t anyone stalking him?”

“The three missing men and the footprints under your window tell a different story.”

She shuddered and held his arm a little tighter. “You have spoken

to my brother about this?"

"Yes, and while he agrees it is the best course of action, he will not go along with it unless you agree."

A smile ghosted over Aurora's lips. "That sounds like Lord Francis. He is a good man."

"Yes, he is. While he and I may not agree on many things, he always acts with the best of intentions."

"Then I agree with the plan. Besides, acting the besotted fool might prepare you for when you actually fall in love."

"I am not capable."

"You want to believe that, but it's not true. You just have to find the right young lady."

"We shall agree to disagree on that," Duke Erembour said. "However, we shall begin enacting our plan to make me appear besotted. I will save you the bad poetry."

Aurora couldn't suppress her smile. "I would rather like to hear one of your poems."

"Then you shall be waiting a long while as I have never written one. However, there must be other foolish things men do."

"Escort me on long walks in the gardens, gaze at me longingly, try to lure me to the shadows for a kiss."

His lips quirked. "I can manage one, perhaps two, of those."

Aurora couldn't help but wonder which two. Color touched her cheeks as she imagined him sneaking into the shadows with her and stealing a kiss.

Or three.

"Come, we will stay well within the gaze of the dowagers to maintain your sterling reputation and tarnish mine."

"You never know. Seeing you vulnerable after us ending our pretend arrangement might very well bring out a dozen young ladies, all hoping to help you feel better."

"I pray not." His tone was more annoyed than anything. "If so, I will have to retreat to Riverwood for the next two Seasons."

"It will only make them see you as that much more heartbroken."

Duke Erembour muttered something ungentlemanly, and Aurora laughed, a genuine laugh despite how afraid she'd been all night.

But in the warm sunshine, with Duke Erembour beside her, Aurora felt safe and protected.

That worried her almost as much as the man outside of her window.

Chapter 10

Kane enjoyed the morning far more than he should have, far more than he thought possible. Lady Aurora was a delightful companion, and it was almost too easy to forget that he was enacting a ruse so that he could escort her and Duke Aegir to safety.

While he had engaged in subterfuge before, it had never been as easy as it was with Lady Aurora.

That concerned him.

He should be finding it far more difficult to play the role of smitten swain than he was. But it was a short-term role, one he had to endure only a few days.

Long enough for him to be certain the surrounding roads were safe for them to travel.

While there were few defenses at Langford House, there would be even fewer on their travels to the Erembour seat.

He just had to be careful not to fall for his own ruse. Such things had never been an issue for him before, but they had never involved Lady Aurora.

Kane blew out a breath.

This was a dangerous game, as it was for any from the Vestra line. His own father had died a broken man because of their curse.

Because he'd loved and lost way too soon.

The Duchess of Erembour had been rumored to be a kind and gentle woman. Not that Kane knew that for certain. He'd never met his mother. She'd died in childbirth with him, and his father had never forgiven him for it.

Nor had his father ever remarried to make certain the lands and estates would be cared for if an accident or illness befell Kane.

Because the old man hadn't put the bottle away long enough to care.

Many whispered that he'd been a different man before his wife's death. His lands prosperous, his investments sound, his mind clear.

Kane had never known him then.

The only man he'd ever known had despised himself, his son, and the entire world.

It was not a situation Kane wished to repeat.

Not that he was in any danger of falling in love with anyone. Kane simply wasn't that type of man. Nor would he ever be. And even if he was such a fool, Lady Aurora would never reciprocate such feelings.

He had even less desire to endure the pain of unrequited love than the poison of true love.

No, love altogether was for someone that wasn't him.

But Duke Aegir had come through for him too many times for Kane to walk away now that the duke's life was threatened.

Whether it had been with supplies, vital information, or even troops, Duke Aegir had been a trusted ally, maybe even a friend.

Kane was not going to let anything happen to Lord Francis Vonne or his sister if he could help it.

And he could help a lot.

Starting with scouting reports coming back in on the area. The locals were gregarious, and the footmen that had brought Kane's carriage to Langford House were skilled in far more than tending his matched team.

He paced the gardens as he thought of all the things that needed doing, of all the reports he waited for but didn't yet have, and his gaze kept drifting back to Langford House.

Duke Aegir had promised to stay with his sister, and Lord Francis would, unless he was physically unable.

While Francis could defend himself, Lady Aurora could wield neither sword nor pistol in her defense.

The idea rankled enough that Kane headed back toward the house even though it was filled with far too many dowagers watching his every move.

Assuming his new role as smitten fool, Kane searched the first floor for Lady Aurora. He discovered her in the drawing room taking tea with the matrons and her brother.

He'd worried for nothing.

But it was too late, and several of the older ladies had spotted him. They motioned him to join them, and under normal circumstances, Kane would have declined, however rude it may have appeared.

Instead, he said nothing as he took a seat across from Lady Aurora and beside Lady Catherine and Lady Manuela.

Aurora smiled and offered the occasional comment as Lady Catherine poured tea and set several cakes onto a plate before handing it to him.

Kane set them aside.

He tried to focus on the mindless prattle of the ladies beside him, reminding himself they might provide insight into any unusual happenings in the area.

But they were not the conversationalists Lady Aurora was, and he regretted having ever entered the room. Still, he endured the afternoon, offering little more than silence as he pondered what he knew about the three missing officers and how they related to Duke Aegir and his sister.

No matter which way he viewed the issue, Kane was certain the swain under Lady Aurora's was related to the missing men.

He was also certain that she was a means to an end, and that end was the Duke of Aegir.

While the Duke of Aegir would not easily be broken, he would do anything for his sister.

Maybe even betray England.

Kane escaped the drawing room when the dowagers finally headed up to their rooms to change for supper. He was not certain he could endure another evening of meaningless chatter, and there was a chance he would do violence to Lord Erik Gautin or Lord Benedict Carlton if they sat beside Lady Aurora again.

Still, Kane had little choice but to attend.

He dressed for dinner, then waited until almost the last possible moment before rejoining the group who was now twittering on endlessly about the results, or lack thereof, from their afternoon hunt.

Kane scanned the room, and his gaze fell on Lady Aurora and Duke Aegir. Neither Lord Erik nor Lord Benedict were in sight.

He crossed the room to Duke Aegir and his sister, and no one bothered to stop, much less slow, him.

"Your Grace," Lady Aurora said and curtsied. She then offered him her hand.

Kane bowed over it, but he didn't release it. Instead, he placed it on his sleeve. "A pleasure, Lady Aurora. Duke Aegir."

He then laid his other hand over hers and assumed the spot on the other side of her.

Lady Aurora smiled and lowered her voice. "You are being rather obvious."

His lips quirked as several young gentlemen decided to wait and tell Lady Aurora about their hunt later. "Yet, it is what is expected of a man smitten, is it not?"

She lifted her gaze to his, then blew out a breath. "For you, perhaps."

"I do hope they are not serving whatever these young men managed to catch."

"Jealous?" Aurora asked.

"I've hunted far more elusive game and lived to tell of it. No, I am not jealous. Simply hungry."

Aurora pursed her lips to hide a smile.

They were soon called into dinner, and Kane did not relinquish Lady Aurora's arm, leaving Duke Aegir to settle for Lady Pemberley.

As Kane guided Lady Aurora into the dining room, satisfaction filled him as he noted that he had been seated beside her.

Spending the afternoon listening to drivel had been worth it after all.

~

Aurora enjoyed the dinner far more than she should have, and a strange giddiness infected her as Duke Erembour led her into the ballroom. While it was not a formal affair, as would be hosted at the end of the house party, there would still be dancing.

A smile wreathed Aurora's face as the first chords of music flowed across the room, and she let herself relax. However, unlike most evenings, Aurora had few gentlemen asking to put their names on her dance card.

For that matter, she had few gentlemen approaching her at all.

She glanced up at the tall and foreboding man beside her.

That explained a lot.

"You are making it rather difficult for me find a dance partner," Aurora murmured. "Perhaps you should try appearing less terrifying and chat with Captain Pemberley and his charming sister?"

"I doubt a love-sick gentleman would do such a thing."

"They might, though it is you we are speaking of."

He tilted his head and regarded her as he might an insect under glass. "You wish to dance?"

"With a dance partner that doesn't step on my feet or bore me to tears, I enjoy it quite a bit. I have never seen you dance, though."

"That's not true. I danced once. When you cajoled me into it."

A smile teased over Aurora's lips. "But I didn't get to watch you. I danced with you. You are a technically skilled dancer, even though you have no passion for it."

"I cannot tell if that is an insult or a compliment."

"Neither and both."

His gaze strayed out to the dance floor that was already filling with people, and an almost imperceptible shudder stole through him. "I had excellent dance instructors, but I never liked being so exposed."

"Your time serving England couldn't have helped with that."

"We all do what we must."

Which was a lie. Many young nobles had done nothing for

England, while others had given too much, and some had given everything.

Her gaze strayed to Lord Benedict Carlton.

It wasn't fair that some had stayed behind to reap the benefits.

He tightened beside her. "If you wish to dance, I will dance with you."

"I do not wish to be a burden or ask you to do something you dislike."

"Lady Aurora, you could never be a burden. And you cajoled me out onto a dance floor once before. I did not expire from it, so if that is any indication, I should survive the experience again." Duke Erembour bowed to her and offered her his hand.

It was the same gesture so many young men across the ballroom made when asking for a dance, yet half of the room were staring at them.

Aurora accepted.

Duke Erembour swept her out to the dance floor, and she couldn't suppress her smile. He was still a technically proficient dancer, but there was something more to his steps now, something graceful and refined.

And he was dancing with her simply because he knew she enjoyed dancing.

There was something thrilling about that.

Something that set her stomach aflutter.

And that was before she added the sensation of his hand at her waist and his thigh parting between hers as he swept her through the steps.

She was breathless at the end of the dance, and when she turned her gaze up to him, her genuine smile lit her face.

He stared down at her, his expression inscrutable.

Regret poured through her as the music ended, but Duke Erembour gently took her elbow and guided her out to the terrace.

"You look flushed. Perhaps a bit of air is in order."

Aurora would have agreed to about anything at that moment as a myriad of emotions crashed through her. She followed Kane out to the brightly lit terrace, enjoying the feel of him beside her far more than she thought possible.

Far more than she should.

They were well within sight of the matrons, but far enough away to have a little privacy.

She glanced up at him.

The strict black evening wear suited him, and his intense green eyes twinkled in the torchlight.

He was attractive, far more attractive than he had any right to be.

He was just pretending to be smitten with her, but Aurora was more uncertain than ever about this ruse.

She could never fall in love with someone like Duke Erembour. She wanted a kind man, one that loved and cherished her.

He had already said he wasn't capable of love, and Aurora believed him.

Mostly.

But she was capable of love, and she was not ready to lose her heart to someone as cold and ruthless as Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour.

Now, to make her heart listen.

Chapter 11

It was late when Aurora returned to her room. She had enjoyed the evening a lot, more than she could remember enjoying any evening.

She closed her eyes and steadied her thoughts as her maid helped her undress and prepare for bed, but her thoughts wouldn't quiet.

If Duke Erembour hadn't told her he was simply feigning interest, Aurora would have believed it real.

But it wasn't.

Just a ruse so he could protect her brother and her without drawing too much attention from those who wanted to harm her brother.

Aurora lay down on her bed and clutched a pillow to her chest.

She didn't want him to fall in love with her.

That would be disastrous.

Still, it was strangely entrancing to be the sole focus of his attention. To have so much intelligence, so much controlled power, centered on her.

It made her feel things…

Aurora sucked in a breath, pressed her thighs together, and hugged her pillow tighter.

Better to focus on who would want to cause her brother harm and why. The sooner they figured that out, the sooner Duke Erembour could end the charade, and the sooner her brother would be safe.

Francis deserved that after all the time he'd spent in France. While her brother spoke little of what had happened there, the few things he'd said whispered of horrors she prayed he'd never see again.

Men dying.

Men he'd called friends dead.

And a man he'd trusted that had betrayed him.

The last had been the hardest for him. The thing that had kept him up so many nights.

While her brother had tried to protect her from learning too much, Aurora had discovered someone under his command had sold him out to the French. Many men had died because of it, and her brother

would have been one of them if not for Duke Erembour.

Her brother and Duke Erembour had then worked together on a series of projects, though her brother always gently deflected questions as to what those projects were.

A part of her worried that Duke Erembour might have taken her brother down a bad path, but that wasn't like either of them.

Many underestimated Francis because he was openly kind.

But that kindness didn't mean he was weak-willed or addle-brained. Just as Duke Erembour was not kind, but he wasn't malicious either.

Dedicated. Unrelenting. Focused.

But not necessarily immoral.

Still, she suspected the three men's disappearance and the stranger beneath her window were all tied to her brother's time in France.

As Duke Erembour had said.

It was the only explanation that made sense.

But without knowing more about what they had been doing, it was impossible for Aurora to have any idea as to why someone would be trying to kill her brother months after he'd returned home.

Not that why they were after Francis mattered other than in helping to figure out who it was so they could stop them.

Aurora clutched the pillow to her chest and closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. She wanted to walk over to her window and check outside, but she knew better than to do that.

At least, Duke Erembour had warned her not to do such a thing.

She pushed the pillow away and paced her room. After a sleepless night the previous evening, she should have fallen asleep as soon as she laid down. Should have barely made it through supper, but then Lady Langford had been kind enough to sit her beside Duke Erembour.

It had been an interesting evening, and Aurora had enjoyed herself far more than she'd expected.

Far more than she should have.

She couldn't think about that.

Down that path lay only trouble.

Aurora rubbed her temples, her thoughts twisting and turning over themselves when the faint click of a lock on the other side of her room drew her attention.

She glanced at the fire poker, then back toward the shadows. "Is someone there?"

"You should be asleep," Lord Kane whispered.

Aurora pressed a hand to her chest and swallowed the ball in her throat. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you."

"Why?"

He paused. “Something isn’t right. I promised your brother I would make certain you were safe. We were both concerned the perpetrators would try again.”

“He wasn’t in his room when I came up to bed.”

“No.”

Aurora licked her lips. “Where is he?”

“Doing a little reconnaissance.”

“Is he safe?”

“Safe enough.” Duke Erembour glanced toward her balcony and frowned.

Aurora swallowed as she realized she was in her nightgown and nothing else. Still, that mattered little compared to whatever danger Francis faced. “What can I do to help?”

Duke Erembour lifted a finger to his lips as he inspected the lock on her door, then investigated the balcony windows. She tipped her head as she watched him, her heart beating faster.

There was a methodical carefulness to his actions that whispered he had done this before.

Possible many times.

It both comforted and terrified her.

Exactly what had Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour been doing in France?

Duke Erembour stood to the side of the large window, then eased back the curtains without exposing himself.

A single shot split the night air, shattering the window and spraying glass across her room.

Before she could even scream, Kane bolted from his position beside the window and pinned her to the floor beneath him.

Aurora’s whole body trembled, and her thoughts scattered. She wanted to cry out, to weep, but both were futile.

Possibly even dangerous.

Instead, she huddled beneath Duke Erembour, trying to make herself as small as possible. Trying not to distract him or draw any more attention to them.

It felt as if hours had passed when Duke Erembour lifted his head. She started to rise beneath him, but he touched a gentle hand to her back to keep her on the floor.

Sucking in a breath, Aurora tried to ignore the glass glittering on the floor and the jagged splinters still clinging to the balcony doors. The evening breeze blew through the opening and flapped the curtains.

A shudder tore through Aurora. She wanted to turn away, but couldn’t, staring transfixed at the splinters of glass that could have killed her just as easily as the shot itself.

Duke Erembour grabbed the same pillow she'd squeezed earlier and tossed it toward the window.

A second shot shattered the night, and a spray of feathers filled the room.

Lord Kane leapt up and pulled her to her feet. Keeping himself between her and the window, he ushered her out of her room and into the hallway that was rapidly filling with guests rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Aurora didn't know if they noticed Kane had come from her room, and she wasn't certain she cared.

At the moment, all she wanted was safety.

To get somewhere she couldn't be shot at.

Then she remembered her brother.

"Francis, where is Francis?" her words caught in her throat as her stomach threatened to empty its contents.

"He's not at Langford House," Duke Erembour promised her as he all but pushed people from his path. "But it seems he found that which he sought."

"What was that?"

Duke Erembour offered no further explanation as he led her down to a small interior parlor. With no windows to let in bleaching sunlight, the furniture was upholstered in rich velvets and deeply colored silks.

And it also meant no one could shoot at them from outside the manor.

Settling Aurora on a chaise, Duke Erembour draped a throw he had grabbed in their flight over her shoulders.

"Stay here. I am going after whoever tried to shoot you."

"He could be anywhere."

"There are very few places he could reach your window from, and even fewer based on the angle of the shot's trajectory."

Aurora reached for him. "It could be a trap. Exactly what it would take to lure my brother out in the middle of the night."

Duke Erembour paused, then glanced down at her hand on his sleeve.

She yanked it back. "I'm sorry, Your Grace. You saved my life. I may have forgotten myself."

He caught her hand between both of his. "More than anything, I want you to be safe."

A shudder stole through Aurora. "I've never been shot at before. I'm a little shaken, but I will be all right."

Lady Catherine cleared her throat from the doorway, and Aurora turned, but she couldn't muster the will to feel embarrassed. Fear left no room for other emotions.

“Are you injured, Lady Aurora?”

“No.” Her voice shook despite herself.

Lord Erembour crouched beside Aurora, never releasing her hand. “She is scared, as is to be expected. Someone shot at her. Twice. Has the constable been called?”

“Lady Langford sent a pair of grooms to get him.”

“Very good.” Lord Erembour glanced at Aurora, then over at Lady Catherine. “Perhaps you could ring for tea or something else to help settle Lady Aurora.”

“Maybe you’ll even drink a sip this time,” Lady Catherine commented.

“Doubtful.”

“Are you going to stay with me?” Aurora tried to keep the hope out of her voice and failed.

“Yes. You made an excellent point, and if the villain does make another attempt, I will be here to assist.”

Aurora closed her eyes and let out the breath she’d been holding as she eased back into the chair. “Thank you.”

Duke Erembour said nothing, but he continued to hold Aurora’s hand between both of his.

Lady Catherine only smiled as she sent for the tea.

Chapter 12

In the commotion of the moment, Duke Aegir was not immediately missed. Once he did return, Kane turned over the telling and retelling of the story to him and Lady Aurora.

Kane then scouted her room, noting where each of the bullets had lodged into the wall.

Leaning on his years of experience, he was certain the culprit had been standing in Lady Langford's prized rose bushes to take the shot.

Kane headed out to the gardens and confirmed his suspicion with the broken branches and outline of a footprint. It appeared to be the same work boot as the print from under Lady Aurora's window.

Whoever wanted her dead was both persistent and skilled.

An unsettling combination.

He hoped Francis had learned something that evening.

After the attempt on Lady Aurora's life, he was no longer certain that an unsecured route to Riverwood was any more dangerous than staying at the Langford's. At least there would be some level of uncertainty for the culprits to deal with, and that would be after they learned that Duke Aegir and his sister had left.

And they wouldn't know right away as a member of the household staff was not behind the attack.

If they had been, they wouldn't have resorted to shooting at Lady Aurora through a window.

Kane blew out a breath as his gaze raked over the gardens. He was glad it wasn't a staff member.

If it had been, he may not have made it to Lady Aurora's room in time.

The thought curled in his stomach and iced his veins.

That could not happen.

He could not let them kill Aurora.

Could not let them hurt her.

Kane balled his fists at his sides as he glanced across the gardens to the tree line beyond. That was where they had gone. He was certain of it. But he didn't allow himself to rush. He followed the tracks, but he already knew what he would find.

And he was correct.

Whoever it was had stashed a horse among the trees and used the fields beyond as an easy escape route. No one would have been in a position to give chase even if they had followed.

Not even him, as he had been protecting a terrified young woman.

He stared at the hoof prints.

So many horses had passed through there for the hunting party the previous day that it was all but impossible to determine which belonged to the man in the rose bushes and which belonged to the hunting party.

Lord Langford was not a devoted hunter, so it was unlikely he would have a hound that could aide in finding the culprit.

Kane blew out a breath.

He knew all that Duke Aegir and his men had been involved with in France, and while Lord Francis Vonne had been a powerful ally for England, he hadn't been any more decorated than other soldiers.

So why target him and his men?

Unless it was for another reason, but Kane couldn't fathom one.

He knew Duke Aegir better than almost anyone. Partially because of their childhood rivalry, but also because Kane had researched him extensively before drawing him into some of the more clandestine operations in France.

Duke Aegir had been a shining light to draw the enemy's attention, and Kane had stabbed them from behind.

It had worked very well, and it had provided a great deal of useful information that had helped to win the war.

Men on the battlefield were part of the equation, but tactics could not be developed without information, and that was where Kane had excelled.

He considered the steel mills he was building.

Where he still excelled.

Information was currency, and that was something he was better than most at extracting.

So why target Duke Aegir?

He needed to learn that quickly as the villain was more than willing to kill Lady Aurora to get to her brother.

As Kane turned and headed back to the manor, Duke Aegir waved to him from across the gardens.

Kane's long strides devoured the distance between them. "You left Lady Aurora alone?"

"Lady Langford gave her a sleeping draught, and Lady Catherine is sitting with her."

"Lady Catherine would be useless against this dastard."

"Yes, but we have many hours until sunset. I suspect he will wait

until then to strike. I do not believe he has ready access to the house, or he would have used it."

"Damn good thing she didn't go on that hunt yesterday."

"I was thinking the same thing." Duke Aegir glanced at the gardens, then back at Kane. "What did you find."

Kane briefly explained the rose bushes and tracks leading to a horse.

"Whoever shot at Aurora has done this sort of thing before, I suspect."

"At least three times," Kane muttered.

"The three men from my command that disappeared." Duke Aegir shook his head. "I still don't understand why. It all seems so strange."

"Best guess is your command killed someone, and their family is looking for vengeance."

"It was war, and we followed orders. I do not wish to think how many lives I ended or how many I was responsible for ending."

"If the situation had been different, they would have killed you," Kane said.

"I suppose you are right, but that does not always make it easier to sleep at night."

"I believe we should leave for Riverwood today. Tell people you are heading home after the terrible fright your sister had. We'll meet in Bell's Crossing."

"Are you certain that is the best course?"

"My hope is that we'll have some distance before our pursuer realizes we have left. And if he believes you are headed back to your country estate, that will buy us enough time to return to Riverwood before he can attack us again. Otherwise, we sit here and wait for him to strike."

Duke Aegir considered a moment, then nodded once. "I agree. I will gather up Aurora with the pretense of heading home."

"How is she?"

"Scared. Worried about me. Worried about you."

"Me?" Kane asked.

"She fears you will do something foolhardy in your quest to capture the perpetrators. And she is not entirely wrong."

"My risks are always calculated."

"But emotion never entered into them before."

Kane wanted to refute him, to say they didn't enter into his calculations now, but there was no point lying when the other person would know it was a lie.

"We will meet you at Bell's Crossing," Duke Aegir said. "There is already enough speculation about your intentions toward Aurora. It might be best if you left sometime after we did."

“We can’t lose time.”

“Nor will we. You will travel light and fast and have no trouble catching up to us.” A strange smile lifted the duke’s lips. “You could even ride with us after Bell’s Crossing. That would make Aurora happy.”

Make Aurora happy.

Kane mentally shook himself.

No, it wasn’t possibly that she would feel anything more towards him than gratitude.

Not uncommon after someone saved your life.

“I will plan for it.”

“Please, be kind to her,” Duke Aegir said.

“Getting shot at is never easy, especially your first time,” Kane said.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Before Kane could ask Duke Aegir to clarify, the duke turned and walked back to the Langford House. Kane stared after him, the strange churning in his stomach warning him again, though of what, he wasn’t certain.

~

Liliana and Violet sat with Aurora in the small parlor as the servants packed for her early departure.

Liliana held Aurora’s hand as Violet paced the room. Aurora would have been up pacing, too, if not for the second sleepless night combined with the tisane Lady Catherine had insisted she drink to help calm her.

Perhaps Aurora would be able to sleep in the carriage, though she doubted it.

She closed her eyes, and she could still hear the crack of the gunshot and the tinkle of broken glass.

Still feel Duke Erembour pinning her beneath him as he protected her from the second shot that had come moments later.

She shivered again despite the warmth of the small room.

Lady Violet hugged her. “Oh, Aurora, this is so awful. Why would anyone try to kill you?”

“That’s not helping,” Miss Liliana snapped.

“But she hasn’t done anything wrong!” Anger shone in Lady Violet’s pale eyes, and her small fists balled at her sides.

Despite Violet’s petite stature, Aurora was glad there wasn’t a

pistol within reach. She had no doubt that Violet had learned how to use one from her brothers, and that she would use it if need be.

"I'm all right thanks to Duke Erembour."

"You never did explain how he managed to get there so quickly," Lady Violet said, her hands clasped in front of her.

Aurora laughed. "No scandal, my dearest one."

"Too bad," Lady Violet pouted. "With how taken he seemed with you, I was certain he was falling in love with you."

"Do you really think it wise to have Satan in love with you?" Aurora asked, arching a brow.

"It would be romantic." Lady Violet flopped down on the chair opposite Aurora. "And when he was standing beside you in the ballroom, he wasn't charming, exactly, but he was… there."

"There?" Liliana rolled her eyes. "How descriptive."

"That's not what I meant." Lady Violet tapped her finger to her chin. "I meant he listened to the conversation, participated, even if most of his remarks were verbal jabs. He's got a sharp intellect. Now if we could just hear his poetry."

"By Prinny's hose, I hope not," Liliana muttered.

"Liliana!" Violet glared at her.

"Enough, both of you," Aurora said. "I am not certain I will see either of you before the next Season, so promise you'll write and tell me everything that's happening."

"Of course." Violet hugged her hard. "We're going to miss you. And now that we don't have you to set up with Satan, we have to focus on making matches for ourselves."

Liliana pulled a face. "Dreadful as it is, she's right. But please take care of yourself. Life is precious and all too short."

Aurora hugged Liliana, then turned the conversation back to the more mundane topic of the day's planned activities.

As much as Aurora was going to miss her friends, she would be glad to be away from Langford House. Both to escape the fear thick enough to choke her each time she walked back into her room, and to save her from the flush of strange emotion she experienced whenever she saw Duke Erembour.

Chapter 13

Kane watched Duke Aegir say his farewells and load his sister into their carriage. It was an elegant and stately conveyance emblazoned with the ducal crest.

Not even remotely unobtrusive.

Easy enough for him to find, but also easy enough for the assailant to find Lady Aurora or Duke Aegir.

But Lord Francis was correct. It would buy them even more time if the assailant searched for his carriage in the direction of the Aegir ancestral lands. Those were southeast of Kane's. And Kane didn't have the trunks needed to maintain a lady.

Not yet, anyway.

Though, if he went through with his plan to marry an orphan, he would not need to escort her into London or deal with the myriad of things a lady of the haute ton would require.

The memory of Lady Aurora in just her summer nightgown teased him, and he tried not to think about her soft curves beneath him when he'd pinned her to the floor to protect her.

And failed.

His body responded in the most inappropriate of ways, and he cursed himself.

He needed another swim in a cold lake.

Yes, she was a desirable female, so desiring her was only logical. And if he could be certain all he felt would stay at desire, he would seriously consider slaking it. Show her all that she was missing by refusing to marry.

Yet, the idea of her marrying and sharing all of that with another man-

Kane blinked as he uncurled his fists, not certain when he'd balled them.

Damn the Vestra curse.

When he took a wife, it would most certainly not be someone like Lady Aurora. Not if he wanted to maintain his sanity.

His control.

He had not so much as kissed her, and he was struggling to

maintain his emotional distance. That had never been an issue for him before.

It was one of the reasons he'd been such an excellent operative for England.

He'd been known as a remorseless, treacherous, and harsh villain, though never lecherous.

Not until now.

Hamlet's words rung through Kane's head, as did Aurora's unusual take on Ophelia.

He shook himself.

No, he would not fall down that path.

Even if the war with France had imbued Kane with enough of a sense of duty that he would see to it that he produced an heir worthy of overseeing the Erembour duchy, his father had taught him the folly of love.

Kane tried to ease his thoughts with a walk, and he paced through the gardens as he attempted to piece together a plan.

Instead, snippets of rumors circling through the remaining guests invaded his quiet.

He couldn't help listening.

Too many years needing those secrets to stay alive had honed his talent to hear what he wasn't supposed to hear.

After too long of listening, he learned the only thing that gave the malicious gossipmongers pause about Lady Aurora was the shattered balcony windows and the gunshots that had rattled the windows.

Of course, it helped that the gossips also enjoyed discussing who had come out of which room. While Kane's name was mentioned repeatedly, particularly how quickly he responded to the situation, none had, as of yet, ascribed it to any illicit activities.

Though he assumed it would only be a matter of time before they whispered that he was the one who had tried to kill Lady Aurora.

They were fools if they thought he meant to murder the woman he loved.

Was pretending to love, Kane corrected himself.

But there seemed to be fewer whispers exchanged about his infatuation with Lady Aurora than why he'd been able to come to her aide so quickly and what he'd been doing on that side of the house at such a late hour.

For the moment, most doubted he had a romantic nature, and he preferred to keep it that way.

Kane would drop a word or two hinting that he was over there for a darker reason and allow them to draw their own conclusions. They would anyway, but if he could help guide it, he would.

He continued his walk through the gardens, waiting until the main

group was engaged in setting up an archery tournament before heading back toward the manor.

His valet had already quietly overseen his packing.

Kane could have his carriage loaded and be on the road within the hour.

"Your Grace," a voice called out from behind him, and he turned to see Lady Catherine strolling down the pathway toward him. "A moment, please."

He grit his teeth and inclined his head.

"As polite and gregarious as ever."

"The same could be said of you, milady."

Lady Catherine said nothing as she walked beside him. Finally, she turned eyes that saw too much on him. "You are highly decorated from your time in France."

He narrowed his eyes. "I am not sure where you heard that."

"I have a few friends in Whitehall."

Kane sucked in a breath. "Then you understand the importance of discretion."

"As do you." She walked beside him a bit longer. "Lady Aurora is a charming young woman. Intelligent. Kind."

"I would not know."

"Lying is never useful when the person you're lying to knows it's a lie."

"You do know people at Whitehall."

Lady Catherine smiled. "I don't know why someone wants her dead, but you will see to it that they don't succeed. After all, it's impossible to marry her if she's dead."

"I have no intention of marrying her."

"Of course you do. If you didn't, you'd be a fool, and I'd never take you for a fool."

Kane stared at Lady Catherine, reminded again to never underestimate anyone.

Lady Catherine lapsed into silence until they drew up to the manor itself. "You look a great deal like your mother. She was a remarkable woman."

"I wouldn't know. Something my father reminded me of often."

"He was heartbroken when she died."

"When I killed her."

Lady Catherine stared at him. "Is that really what you believe?"

"I was told it often enough." Kane tried and failed to keep the bitterness from his voice.

"Your father was a fool. She wanted you more than anything. I visited her a few times when she was enceinte, and she glowed with happiness. You were all she talked about it."

“Odd, then, that I cost her life.”

“Tragic, but you are no stranger to tragedy. It would also have been a tragedy to deny her what she most wanted, which was you and your father. She loved you both beyond words. I pray they found each other again in our Lord’s embrace.”

“I doubt that’s where my father went.”

Lady Catherine surprised him and chuckled. “Maybe not. Or maybe she loved him enough for Saint Peter to open the gates for him, too.”

Kane turned his gaze to the Langford manor. “Again, I would not know.”

“She probably loved you enough for Saint Peter to open the gates for you, and I bet Lady Aurora does, too.”

Kane’s head snapped around, and it took him a moment to suppress his expression of surprise and horror. “Why would you say that?”

“Truth, Duke Erembour, is precious and rare, but I offer it to you as a gift for your mother.”

“Lady Aurora-”

“You have been in France for how many years while I have been in the ballrooms of London. I have seen the young swains surround her, ply her with pretty words and handsome faces. But she never once smiled at them as she did at you last night. I don’t know what this attack against her means, but if anyone can keep her alive, it’s you. And that’s what you were heading off to do, wasn’t it?”

Kane stared at Lady Catherine a moment. There was more to her, a lot more to her, than he had imagined.

“Go,” she said. “I will make your excuses, and I expect to be invited to the wedding.”

“Wedding?”

“Yes, the large, lavish affair you are going to host to introduce the world to your wife.”

“What makes you so certain-”

“There’s going to be a wedding,” Lady Catherine assured him. “I just hope you’re wise enough to make sure you’re the bridegroom.”

Before he could say another word, Lady Catherine left him and rejoined the rest of the guests.

Kane forced himself to concentrate on packing, saying his farewells to the Langfords, then chasing after Duke Aegir.

He did not want to think about Lady Catherine’s strange words, or who the bridegroom would be if it wasn’t him.

Chapter 14

The rocking of the carriage lulled Aurora after two sleepless nights, but she still couldn't bring herself to rest. Every movement outside the carriage drew her attention, and even after she realized it was a bird or even just a leaf, it took a while to calm herself again.

Her brother linked his fingers with hers. "It will be all right. I do not think the culprit knows we have left yet, and I believe he will search for us back home rather than at Riverwood."

"At least at first."

"Duke Erembour took in many that had been in service to him in France. I suspect Riverwood will be well guarded."

"Did we take in men that had been in service to you?"

"Some, yes, though the men who served under me were different."

"Different how?"

"I could never do all that Duke Erembour did. He and I are too dissimilar, but England needed both of us," Francis said.

"You're not answering my question."

Francis squeezed her hand. "He served England in a way only he could."

"He was a spy."

Francis winced. "Not a spy. More like a secret operative."

"What's the difference?"

"I suspect spies report information. Duke Erembour gathered it from many sources and acted on it."

"And those are the men he hired when they came home?" Aurora shuddered. They may all have been doing what England asked of them, what England needed, but it still terrified her.

Not that Duke Erembour needed to be any more terrifying.

"Duke Erembour is a good man."

Aurora raised a brow. "Are we talking about the same Lord Kane Vestra that used to gift me snakes and frogs? The same one that can terrify a man with just a look?"

"I suspect he had a reason for giving you frogs. And I did not say he was a kind man or a polite one. But he is a good man, nonetheless."

Her brother wasn't wrong, and Aurora wasn't certain how that made her feel. Not that it really mattered how she felt.

Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour, would never harbor such a soft emotion as love, and only love would convince Aurora to change her course and marry.

She wanted what her parents had enjoyed, and anything else would be a poor substitution.

The sound of horses' hooves yanked her head up, and Francis squeezed her fingers. "Speak of the Devil."

She buried a smile as she remembered Violet's name for the Duke of Erembour.

Their carriage stopped, and Francis stepped out to speak with the duke. A moment later, Francis stepped back inside as the coachmen unloaded two trunks from the rear of the carriage.

"Lord Kane believes it best if we ride with him. Our carriage will catch up eventually, but if the villain is following us, he will continue to pursue our carriage."

Aurora sucked in a breath as she glanced over at the simple black carriage beside them. It was perfectly serviceable and nondescript. It displayed no family crest or anything else proclaiming its owner.

She just prayed it was more comfortable to ride in than it appeared.

Not that she had any right to be picky.

Duke Erembour was doing his best to protect them.

If he wanted her dead, all he would've had to do is let her stand, and the second bullet would've hit her.

She shuddered at the recollection, and Francis slid her arm through his as he escorted her to the other carriage and handed her inside of it.

Aurora was pleasantly surprised by the sumptuous silk interior and thick, comfortable seats.

The austere outside was deceptive.

Once she was settled with Francis beside her, Duke Erembour rapped on the roof and the carriage set off at a fast clip.

Duke Erembour's intense green gaze met her own, and Aurora's breath caught in her chest. He was a hard man, handsome in an unyielding, unforgiving sort of way.

A hint of a smile quirked the ends of his lips. "Rest. It is a long ride to Riverwood, and you had a long night. Two of them."

Aurora said nothing as she leaned her head back against the squabs and closed her eyes. She tried everything she knew to fall asleep. Counting backward from one hundred a dozen times. Imagining floating on a cloud. Breathing in, holding it, then breathing out.

When she opened her eyes again, Francis was already asleep, but Duke Erembour stared out the carriage window.

"Is someone following us?" Aurora whispered so as not to wake her brother.

"No."

She pursed her lips as she followed his gaze out the window.

"But I am still concerned. You will both be safer at Riverwood, but that is a temporary solution. We must figure out who hunts you and why."

"I have no enemies, much less someone that would want to kill me."

"Everyone has enemies. Even you." Duke Erembour leveled her with his green stare. "How many ladies would like to remove you as competition from the marriage market? Would any of their mothers resort to murder to make certain their daughter made a good match?"

"I… like to think not. Besides, I have no intention of marrying."

"That alone could be a reason. If one of the most beautiful, well-dowered, and influentially connected young ladies dismisses the prospects of marriage, what sort of example does that set for others?"

She lifted her shoulders. "I have not completely dismissed it, but everyone sees me just as you have said. Pretty, well-dowered, and the sister of a duke. No one bothers to learn about me, and if you don't know someone, it is impossible to love them."

"Love is a foolish reason to marry."

"Maybe, but it is the only one that is worth the hassle of marriage. I have no need for heirs, and my father made certain I had financial security."

"A family doesn't entice you?" Lord Kane asked.

"I will miss not having one, but I can spoil Francis's children."

"And if he marries a woman that despises you?"

"Could you really imagine Francis marrying someone like that?"

Duke Erembour turned his attention back to the passing countryside. "Not intentionally."

"And what of you? Still intent on marrying an orphan?"

He turned his green gaze back to her, the intensity of it making it difficult for her to swallow. "Yes."

She folded her hands in her lap as she ignored the lead in her stomach. "You have found a solution, then. I am certain you will have your choice."

"We shall see," he murmured. "In the meantime, you need rest. Try to get some sleep."

She nodded and closed her eyes, trying all her strategies again to sleep. After what seemed like forever, she opened her eyes again. "I can't sleep. I'm not sure I will ever be able to again."

Duke Erembour took her hand and eased her across the carriage beside him. He tucked her close. “Rest, Lady Aurora, I will not allow anything to happen to you or your brother.”

She shouldn’t allow him to hold her like this, but her brother was across from them. Nothing untoward could happen.

And he felt so strong beside her.

So good.

So right.

He would protect her, keep her safe.

A smile curved her lips as she laid her head against him and closed her eyes.

This time, sleep came easily.

~

Kane watched her eyes close, listened as her breathing fell into the steady rhythm of sleep.

Her soft pink lips begged to be kissed, but not now. Not until she could kiss him back. Not until she could want him as much as he wanted her.

And he did want her.

Kane cursed under his breath.

He needed to avoid her, to get as much distance between himself and her as possible until the insanity gripping him passed.

But that was exactly the opposite of what he wanted.

He had no words for this foolishness. It was not something he expected from himself, not something he liked. He should eradicate it with the same ruthless efficiency he did anything that stood in his way, but something stopped him.

He just wasn’t certain what.

The dregs of spring were still grey and chill, and the warmth of her in his arms was soothing.

That was another warning.

He’d never noticed the weather much beyond what advantage or disadvantage it gave him for the tasks ahead.

Perhaps he was becoming soft in his age. And that simply wouldn’t do.

But that would mean forever parting with Lady Aurora and letting her find love with someone else.

And she would find love, eventually.

Her spirit shone too brightly. It was only a matter of time before

an army of suitors fell at her feet, professing their love for her. They would even shower her with poems, when he could only offer her the words of the Great Bard.

Though now he understood why Shakespeare called love a fever, a disease, whereas reason was the physician.

Kane needed to remember that, and he needed to remember the madness the bard promised if he did not keep the prescriptions of that physician.

It was a fate his father had suffered, and one that would be his if he didn't exercise care.

Kane stared down at Aurora asleep on his shoulder.

It was foolishness that made him desire her, made him want her, made him l-

No, he was not so foolish.

He would see her and Duke Aegir safely to Riverwood, then he would deal with those who'd tried to kill Lady Aurora.

Once that was completed, he would send Duke Aegir and his sister home while he hired a chatelaine and married an orphan.

Kane ignored the voice at the back of his brain reminding him that Lady Aurora was a ward of her brother because she was an orphan.

But she was exactly the wrong type of orphan.

The type he could so easily fall in love with if he wasn't careful.

The type he might already be in love with.

Chapter 15

When the carriage stopped to refresh their horses, Aurora discovered that Kane had settled her back beside her brother. Francis also woke at the sudden cessation of motion, and he glanced out the window.

"Have we been followed?" Aurora asked.

"I am uncertain, but Duke Erembour will know. And he will take appropriate countermeasures. There is little we can do other than follow his directions until we reach Riverwood."

"And then?"

"Then I will need to contact the families of the men who disappeared. See what I can learn from them. Perhaps arrange to visit them."

"Is that safe?"

"I am not certain. It all depends on what the perpetrator seeks."

Aurora touched her brother's shoulder. "He's already proven that he'll try to kill us."

"Which makes it seem likely that there is something intrinsic to us."

"Is it possible they lost someone in the war and are blaming you?"

Francis considered. "It is possible. There were many who lost their lives in the conflict and saying I was simply following orders holds little comfort to those who lost a loved one. But if that is the case, I could not guess who would be after me. While I took many lives for England, there were none that particularly stood out."

Francis stared at the floor, and Aurora took his hand in hers. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"I am, too, but I am glad I did it instead of you. Knowing you were home safe was one of the things that always kept me going." He paused a moment. "I really want you to find happiness. I hope you will not give up searching for it."

"Thank you, Francis. I won't."

He glanced around the carriage. "You might have to search in some unexpected places, but it's out there for you."

"You aren't trying to play matchmaker, are you?" she asked, her

voice light, though she felt anything but playful.

"Sometimes it is hard to see what is already there when you are trying so hard to find something else. For example, many wanted to match you to Lord Erik. He's physically attractive, charismatic, and engaging, much like you."

"We wouldn't make each other happy," Aurora murmured, well aware of those who had sought to pair her with the young earl.

"I agree, and I am glad you have the sense you've always had. Duke Erembour is none of those things, yet-"

Before her brother could finish his sentence, Duke Erembour appeared as if summoned.

"Something is wrong," Francis said.

"Bridge is out up ahead," Lord Kane answered. "Flood waters."

"Whoever is after us could not control flood waters," Aurora murmured.

"Perhaps not, but it makes me uneasy." Duke Erembour frowned. "It's too coincidental, and I don't believe in coincidences."

"What are the options?" Francis asked.

"There is another bridge to the north and to the south. The one to the north would be the logical choice for us to take to return to Riverwood. The south would take longer, and the roads are less well-traveled."

"We were to meet up with the Aegir carriage shortly before the bridge?" Lord Francis asked.

Duke Erembour nodded once.

"Then I suggest that we give them two targets instead of one. I will take the Aegir carriage south, and you take Aurora and head north. We will meet up at Riverwood."

"No," Aurora said. "If they go after you, you'll be alone."

Duke Erembour contemplated a moment. "Whoever it is managed to get ahead of us and use the flood waters to incapacitate an already weak bridge. They don't have numbers on their side. At least not yet. If we split up, we would have to make it appear as if you were both in the Aegir carriage."

"At the village before the bridge. Both Aurora and I will make a show of entering the Aegir carriage, then you will slip her into yours. We will have a minor dispute, and I will display my lack of knowledge of the area. You will then head north, and I will head south."

"It could work," Duke Erembour said.

"And leave my brother alone to face the attackers."

"Not alone," Francis said. "I will have backup with me, and many underestimate me. I did not lead men into battle and survive without learning how to fight and how to survive."

Aurora bit her lip.

“I do not wish to hurt your feelings, dear sister, but it is you I must protect. If you are with me, there are far fewer things I can do. We must get you to safety.”

“Francis…”

“And we are not even certain they are after me. So far, both attempts have been made against you. While the first blackguard could have simply thought your room was easier to access, it makes far less sense for the second. They would have had a much easier time shooting into my room than yours, and they had ample opportunity.”

Cold pooled in Aurora’s fingers and toes. “I can’t think of anyone that would want to kill me.”

“While that may be, it does not change the fact that someone has made at least one attempt, and possibly two, against you. As your brother, it’s my duty and honor to see to your safety.”

“Lady Aurora,” Duke Erembour said. “For once, I agree with your brother. The dastards are after you. I don’t know why, other than as a means to Duke Aegir, but it still remains that they have not yet tried anything against him. Perhaps because they know he is a difficult target and can use you to break him.”

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “I will do as you ask. Just please, be careful. I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to either of you protecting me.”

Francis leveled Duke Erembour with his golden stare. “You will keep my sister safe?”

Duke Erembour dipped his head. “I would give my life to protect her.”

“All right then, we make plans for how to make the switch, when to regroup, and what to do if we are attacked.”

~

Aurora hated the entire plan.

It put Francis in danger, separated the three of them, and left her at Duke Erembour’s mercy.

If anyone ever learned that she had ridden alone with him, she would be forced to marry him or be considered a soiled dove.

It was rubbish as Duke Erembour may be many things, but he was not a man that took what a woman wasn’t offering. Though, she supposed, society would assume she was offering simply by being alone with him.

Even though the entire plan had been hatched to save her life.

Aurora blew out a breath as the carriage stopped at the hitching post. They were informed again of what they already knew: the bridge was washed out and they would have to take one to the north or south to cross the river.

Francis and Duke Erembour debated the merits of various paths, each playing their role well. If Aurora hadn't been in on the plan, she would never have suspected that they had concocted the whole argument.

Made her wonder how many times they had played out a similar scene for other reasons.

When Francis finally entered the Aegir carriage and slammed the door behind himself, Duke Erembour had already climbed into his carriage. Even though Aurora knew what was supposed to happen next, she still startled as Duke Erembour used the side of his carriage to conceal himself as he opened the door of the Aegir carriage. He slid Aurora out of the carriage, and shielding her with his body, he guided her into his carriage.

The door closed behind them, and before she could say anything, Lord Erembour's carriage headed north.

"Will he be okay?" Aurora asked as she resisted the urge to peer out the rear carriage window.

"He will be fine. I am much more worried about us."

"You are?"

"They won't follow him south, though if they do, there are numerous small hamlets there that will be able to provide him with assistance should the need arise."

"Then why send Francis in a different direction? Why not stay together?"

"Time," Duke Erembour said simply. "Whoever is tailing us will have to take the time to make a decision, possibly even to ask the locals what they both saw and heard. Anything to slow them is to our benefit."

"How are they catching us so quickly?"

"There is more than one, and they are on horseback. Much faster than a carriage. What worries me more is that one of them knows the area well enough that they were both aware of the bridge and its state of repair. That means they have been planning this for a time."

"Do you still think this is all related to my brother's time in France?"

"I am more certain than ever. All three of the men that disappeared worked with your brother on special assignments. We have yet to find their bodies, though I am certain they are dead."

Aurora winced.

"And their attempts against you make me suspect that what they

seek is information. If they were able to obtain you, Duke Aegir would tell them anything in the vain hope of having you returned safely."

"But they wouldn't 'return' me."

"That is not how this game works."

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "Did Francis understand this game when he agreed to play?"

"Possibly not, but he is extremely skilled at it. People underestimate him all the time, making it easy for him to do what others cannot. But I do not believe he understood that it could follow him back to England. Not that I expected it would. We ended any of the French operatives that ever learned of us."

"So there must have been one you didn't know about."

"Possible. I would have said unlikely until all of this happened."

"What do we do?"

"Follow the plan."

Aurora balled her hands. "I don't want to be helpless or in need of protection. I want-"

"What you want is irrelevant."

His words stung, and Aurora sucked in a breath as she turned her attention out of the carriage and refused to so much as glance at him.

"Lady Aurora," Duke Erembour said, softening his words, "you are the very reason men chose to protect England. You could have been the face on the recruiting poster. Let us protect you."

She turned back to him, her hands still balled into fists. "Teach me to shoot a pistol. I may not be strong enough to wield a sword effectively, but a pistol is something even I can manage."

"Absolutely not."

"Why not? You think I'm not capable?"

"You are entirely too capable, and I never want you to see the life extinguished from a man's eyes and know that you caused it. It changes you, and I wish for you to stay just as you are."

"Then teach me another way to protect myself and those I love. I can't bear to lose one of them because I couldn't protect them."

"Once we reach Riverwood, we will discuss it."

"That's not a 'yes'."

"And I didn't deny your request, either. I just want to be certain it's still your request once we reach Riverwood."

It would be, but she didn't utter the words. And she would hold him to his promise.

Chapter 16

Kane didn't try to distract Lady Aurora from the myriad of dark thoughts that haunted her. Many of them were probably the same thoughts that haunted him.

But Kane had no intention of falling prey to whoever was stalking them, and it was a game he and Duke Aegir had perfected long ago. Duke Aegir was the golden lion, drawing the enemy's attention, and Kane was the cobra that struck the silent, fatal blow.

Kane had already started the plan in motion, but things were different this time. This time, they had a civilian to contend with, and not just any civilian, but Duke Aegir's sister.

And Kane could not allow anything to happen to Lady Aurora.

He'd given his driver instructions to stop briefly at the village of Hamlish. They would pause at an inn there, then continue on with the flow of traffic. There were no other inns within a two-hour ride, but Kane was acquainted with a few locals.

It would be easy enough to receive refuge from one of them.

Kane was far more concerned for Lady Aurora and her reputation. If word ever got back to the society matrons of all that had transpired, it would ruin her chances of ever making a good match.

Of ever falling in love and having the family she desired.

A foolish reason to marry, but it was what she wanted.

While Kane didn't want to take that from her, he needed her to survive this, to be alive long enough to face ruin.

Of course, he could simply marry her and allow her to avoid the censure of society while securing the wife he needed.

Well, not exactly the wife he needed if he was intent on avoiding the curse that had claimed his father.

Not that Kane loved Lady Aurora, or had been falling in love with her even before he'd taken the assignment in France. Not that he'd given her frogs because he wanted her attention rather than merely to annoy her. Or that he had pulled her hair because any word from her was better than no word.

She was far too sunny and bright to ever be happy in Riverwood manor.

To ever be happy with him.

And what she deserved more than anything was happiness.

But she wouldn't get that if anyone learned they were alone together.

Yet, Duke Aegir had been correct that they needed to give their assailants two targets, and he had been equally correct that they could not put both of their potential targets in the same carriage.

If they had, it was certain the villains would have followed that carriage.

Whoever these men were, this was not the first time they had hunted someone.

Not the first time they had killed.

Kane still did not understand why someone wanted Aurora dead, but he did not doubt they did. And they would kill her right after they used her to get to Duke Aegir.

Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour, balled his fists.

They were not getting her.

He would use everything he'd learned in his years of service to guarantee it.

"You're worried," Aurora murmured.

"Yes."

"Will Francis be okay?"

His lips twitched.

She was still more concerned for her brother than she was for herself. He imagined what it would be like to have so much concern directed toward him.

Once, he would have considered it smothering.

Now, he was less certain.

"If I did not think Duke Aegir could handle this, I would not have parted ways with him. We will see him again at Riverwood."

"Then what is troubling you?"

"Other than someone has tried to kill you at least once, possibly twice, and we do not know why? That three good officers are missing and presumed dead, and their only connection is that they were in the same reconnaissance team?"

"They are after me for information my brother has."

He didn't disagree with her, but Duke Aegir had very little information.

Kane had kept it that way on purpose.

So what did they want, then?

He wasn't certain, but he wouldn't allow harm to come to Lady Aurora, whatever that meant to him.

Lady Aurora lapsed back into silence, and she didn't fill it with endless chatter despite her fear.

While he appreciated it, he also wanted to alleviate her concern.

At least a little of it.

And he wouldn't mind hearing her talk about something that pleased her. Or earning one of her genuine smiles.

She appeared very alone, hands clasped in front of her, as she huddled into herself on the seat opposite him.

While reason warned him against it, Kane moved onto the bench beside her anyway. Rather than pulling away, she eased closer to him, a soft smile on her lips as she closed her eyes.

He didn't deserve such trust, not with all that was going through his head, all he was wrestling to control, but a strange warmth bloomed in his chest anyway.

Tucking her close to him, Kane breathed in the soft scent of her. A light fragrance he only noticed when he was this close to her. Almost as if it was a reward for… He shook the thoughts from his head.

"Your brother packed several books into your trunks for you. What are you reading?"

Lady Aurora smiled up at him, but she told him, and he listened, enjoying her in his arms far, far too much.

~

As planned, the driver stopped at the inn in Hamlish long enough to refresh their horses, then they headed out again with the fading sun.

Lady Aurora shifted in her seat beside him. "Are you worried about traveling at night?"

"Yes, which is why we won't be. Someone I am acquainted with lives out this way. I am certain they will put us up for the night."

"I don't wish to endanger anyone."

"It will not be an issue with Bartholomew, and I suspect our pursuers will be hard pressed to find us."

"How far are we from Riverwood?"

"If we continue at our current pace, we will make it before the sun sets tomorrow."

"I'm really worried about Francis."

"He will be a day or two behind us. Once we arrive at Riverwood, I will dispatch a team of my very best men to make certain he reaches us safely and quickly."

"Thank you." She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. "I don't know what I would do without you."

Her words stabbed him.

Kane didn't understand all he felt, but he did not want to lose her now or ever. Did not want her to stop depending on him and return to her life in Aegir lands. Did not want her to head off for the frivolity of the London ballrooms without him.

The knowledge punched him in the gut.

But he didn't shy away from it.

Kane had to figure out a way to crush it, to find the emotional oblivion he'd enjoyed before he'd seen her standing beside her brother at the damned ball.

As the thought twisted in his head and in his stomach, the carriage turned down a wooded path. A pair of massive Irish wolfhounds bounded through the trees towards them, and the carriage lurched forward as the driver calmed the horses.

"Are those… wolves?" Lady Aurora asked as more dogs joined the first.

"Irish wolfhounds. They were used to eradicate the wolf population in Ireland."

Lady Aurora stared out the window at the massive and powerful beasts. "We haven't had an issue with wolves here in recent history."

"Nor have they in Ireland. The wolfhounds are remarkably capable."

"Then what are they doing here?"

"Bartholomew oversees them for me. They were a gift from my great-grandmother's family. They have their uses, so we have kept the line going."

"It's true, then, that you have Irish ancestors."

He lifted his shoulders. "The Vestra family curse."

Before she could ask him anything more, the carriage stopped before a tidy cottage nestled in the center of the woods. Kane whistled three times, modulating the pitch each time, before opening the door.

The massive dogs circled the carriage, but they all sat with their tails wagging. Kane stepped down from the carriage and handed Lady Aurora down beside him.

She glanced warily at the dogs.

"I warn you, if you pet one of them, you must pet them all, and then we will be out here all night."

She blinked, then smiled, one that warmed the entire clearing.

A bear of a man with a shock of bright red hair rushed out of the house to greet them.

"Yer Grace," he said as he blundered through a bow and mangled all the other courtly graces.

Kane ignored it and clapped the man on the shoulder. "How are the hounds doing?"

“Good, good. That bitch you sent down, she’s a good ‘un. Keeps the rest in line, she does, and she’ll be havin’ her first litter ‘fore the end of spring.”

“Bartholomew, who’s our guests?” A woman built from the same hardy stock sauntered out onto the porch, then butchered a curtesy when she saw Duke Erembour. “Sorry, Yer Grace, didn’t know you was coming.”

“It’s quite all right, Sonya. I did not announce it.”

Her gaze slid to Lady Aurora, and Sonya’s eyes widened. “And with yer pretty wife. Where are our manners? Please, come inside.”

Lady Aurora glanced at him, but Kane dipped his head in silent acknowledgement.

Aurora accompanied Sonya into the cottage as Kane waited outside a moment longer. Bartholomew understood the signal and waited with him. Once the ladies were safely ensconced inside, Kane explained that he suspected that they were being pursued and that the villains had already tried to kill Lady Aurora.

“It is my hope that, despite all I have told you, we could spend the night here. It is not safe in Hamlish.”

“Course you can stay. After all I owe you…” Bartholomew shook his head. “I’ll let the dogs run tonight. If anyone even gets close to the house, we’ll know it. Meanwhile, you and your wife can get a good night’s sleep.”

“I appreciate it.” Kane paused. “There is one other thing.”

“Name it, Yer Grace. I’ll do anything I can.”

“I need to get a message to Riverwood as quickly as possible, and it must make it there.”

Bartholomew’s face split into a wide grin. “I’ll see it done. You’ll have to write the message though.”

Kane returned to the carriage and withdrew a slim sheet of parchment. He wrote the simple code that called for urgent assistance and the location. He then handed the slip to Bartholomew.

The slip disappeared into the man’s massive palm. “C’mon inside. Caught fresh fish for supper Sonya was fixing.”

Kane followed the huge man into the cottage.

Lady Aurora sat at a rough table, laughing and chatting with Sonya as if Sonya were any other lady in one of London’s finest ballrooms.

It didn’t surprise Kane.

Duke Aegir, despite his exalted title, had never exhibited any of the hubris endemic to so much of the nobility. It was one of the reasons he had made such a good operative.

That Lady Aurora shared the trait was to be expected, yet it still pleased Kane. She also hadn’t corrected them when they’d called her his wife.

That pleased him far more than he wanted to admit.

Kane closed his eyes for a moment.

She was not his wife and never would be. He had to remind himself of that.

Even if his heart was trapped by the Vestra curse, his reason could still act as his physician.

He grimaced as he remembered the sonnet the Bard himself had written, promising that reason would fail.

Kane pushed the thoughts away and sat beside Lady Aurora, enjoying the well-prepared food and easy company. In turn, he shared news from London.

As the last of the light faded and the fire in the hearth burned low, Sonya showed him and Lady Aurora to a room. She then wished them a good evening.

Lady Aurora blew out a breath and sank down onto the corner of the bed.

"I am sorry for the ruse," Kane said. It was a lie. He wasn't sorry at all, but it was a lie she expected.

And one he wished was true.

"It couldn't be helped. A lady, alone with a gentleman, I was either your wife or your…" She blushed but couldn't bring herself to say the word.

"I will never let anyone tarnish your reputation."

A tired smile tugged on her lips. "Would being your wife really tarnish a lady's reputation?"

Kane swallowed hard as he stared at her. "It is not an enviable position."

"Then they're fools." She glanced toward the small window. "It seems I shall come out of this adventure dead or ruined. I am not certain which is worse."

He crouched down beside her. "Dead is infinitely worse."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am." He gently cupped her cheek and turned her to face him. "There is nothing worse than losing you. Nothing. It is why Duke Aegir and I have gone to such lengths to protect you."

"My brother," she whispered, and leaned into his palm. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. "I pray he is safe."

"He is more skilled than you know."

She nodded and tipped her face to stare at the ceiling and hold back her tears. "He's probably as worried about me as I am about him, though I doubt he understands the full extent of this predicament."

"But I do. Marry me, Lady Aurora." The words tumbled out before Kane could stop them, and the wide-eyed look she gave him had him cursing himself.

“I couldn’t do that to you.”

“Do that to me?” He stood and turned away from her. “You are the one that would suffer. Do not think I am unaware of my cold and austere nature. You would not get bad poetry or kind gestures with me as your husband, and you deserve both. But it would preserve your reputation and your place in society.”

“Your Grace.”

Her quiet words mocked him, and he balled his fists at his side as he stared at the ceiling, angry with himself at his momentary loss of control.

Lady Aurora stepped in front of him, then slid her arms around him.

Every fiber of Kane’s being demanded he wrap her in his arms and pull her to him. To kiss her. To carry her to the bed and take her.

Instead, he stood as still as a stone, commanding himself to be the gentleman she deserved.

Lady Aurora eased away from him. “I don’t want you out of obligation, particularly when everything you are doing you are doing to safeguard me and my brother.”

Her words crashed into him. “You think you are an obligation?”

“I annoy you. I always have. Isn’t that why you found the ugliest frogs in the pond to give to me?”

Kane lost his battle with himself and pulled her to him. Lowering his head, he kissed her hard on the mouth.

Rather than pulling away from him and slapping him as he deserved, her eyes fluttered closed, and she leaned into the kiss, offering him as much as he would take.

Kane pressed her against him, delighting in the sensation of her soft curves, of the scent of her, of the way her breath caught.

He angled his head over hers and deepened the kiss.

Lady Aurora melted against him, ceding her mouth to him as she tightened her arms around him.

His promise to Duke Aegir ran through his mind, and he had already done enough damage to Lady Aurora’s reputation.

He could not, would not, take advantage of the situation, though he was sorely tempted.

The idea of stripping her traveling dress off her and spreading her across the simple bed pane consumed him.

He wanted her naked beneath him, wanted his name on her lips, wanted her to hold him in the most intimate of embraces.

But not like this.

Someone could be hunting her even now, and he couldn’t be certain how much of her response was genuine and how much fueled by fear.

He did not want her out of fear.

Easing back from the kiss, he tried to catch his breath when she framed his face in her hands and pulled him back to her.

While Kane had trained well in the art of seduction, he was not prepared for the jolt that seared him at Lady Aurora's gentle kiss or the way her small hands explored his neck and shoulders.

The way she gave so much.

Artlessly. Guilelessly. Genuinely.

By God, he wanted her.

Wanted to make her his in every way possible.

Kane allowed himself to indulge a moment more, then he lifted his lips from hers and trailed a kiss over her forehead. "We do not know if those who tried to kill you followed us here."

"You're right, of course." She blinked up at him. "It's just that I've never been kissed like that before."

He closed his eyes. He could add cad to his list of sins.

"When we know we're safe, will you kiss me like that again?"

"Yes." The promised escaped him before he could stop it, and he was rewarded with one of her beautiful smiles, the one that made his whole chest ache.

Kane cursed himself, but he stayed silent as he clamped down on the urges burning through him and remembered the danger they faced as he helped her into her nightgown.

He then lay down on the small bed beside her, still fully dressed.

Rather than shy away from him after the bounds he'd overstepped, Lady Aurora snuggled against him.

Her trust in him, even now, was so complete that she was soon asleep.

Kane's whole body responded to her nearness, to the swell of her bottom against him, the curve of her breasts under his protective arms.

He ignored it as he tucked her close and listened for footsteps outside of the cottage.

He would do anything to keep Aurora safe.

Even from him.

Chapter 17

When Aurora awoke, her “husband” was already gone.

She flopped back on the bed as she remembered the kiss they’d shared. The one that had made her insides feel like melted butter.

How was such intense emotion even possible, much less possible with Lord Kane Vestra? She’d never wanted another man to kiss her at all, but she hadn’t wanted Duke Erembour to stop kissing her.

Perhaps Lady Violet was right, and he was Satan. He was certainly tempting her with all the things young ladies were told they weren’t supposed to want.

Except, he’d also offered her the one thing all ladies were supposed to want.

Marriage.

She still didn’t understand his reaction.

When he’d offered to marry her, he’d seemed to be in excruciating pain. As if he was inviting a wasp’s nest to share his bed and his life.

But when he’d kissed her, he’d had a completely different reaction.

Aurora hugged a pillow to her chest.

It was the first time she’d ever been kissed like that, and she didn’t want it to be the last. He’d promised to kiss her again if she survived all of this, but she had extracted the promise under duress. She wasn’t certain he would keep it.

Or would want to keep it.

The thought pierced her.

Shoving away the pillow, Aurora pushed herself to sitting. Apparently being shot at had addled her.

Here she was worried that Duke Erembour, the same man Lady Violet had labeled as Satan, would not kiss her again.

She needed to stop thinking and acting like a ninny.

Climbing out of bed, Aurora laid out a fresh traveling gown, underpinnings, and her brush. Her lady’s maid hadn’t ridden with them, so she did her best to straighten her hair before tackling her traveling dress and the laces down the back.

She would not be able to do those herself.

She tried hard not to remember how careful Duke Erembour had

been helping her out of her gown the previous evening, as if the slightest touch of her skin would scald him. A part of her applauded his propriety, but the part of her that was acting like a ninny deeply regretted not feeling his hands on her bare back.

Or at least through the silk of her chemise.

Aurora blew out a breath. She really was being foolish.

She needed Duke Erembour to stop caring about her, to stop being eloquent even if he didn't always follow society's rules on politeness.

To stop being so intelligent.

So intense.

So him.

Aurora realized she was doomed to being a ninny, but it wouldn't matter once they dealt with the villains trying to kill her. She would return to Aegir lands and never see Duke Erembour again.

She hoped.

Except she didn't really hope that at all.

She pressed a hand to her stomach and waited for Duke Erembour to return to help with her gown. After not even hearing the deep rumble of his voice, she wrapped a shawl around the gaping back of the dress.

Aurora slipped downstairs and found Sonya in the kitchen. The other woman clucked her tongue and helped Aurora with the laces.

"Never gonna understand these dresses. A soul can't dress herself."

"I would have waited for Duke Erembour, but I think he's gone out already."

"His Grace and Bartholomew were out at first light. Hounds was restless all night."

Aurora pressed a hand to her chest.

"Don't you worry none. Them pups are mostly gentle, but they'll have a thing or two ta say 'bout poachers or the like."

"Yes, poachers," Aurora murmured.

Sonya plated scrambled eggs, thick slices of bacon, and fresh toast. She then set it in front of Aurora. "Need to keep up your strength with you two being newlyweds and all."

Color touched Aurora's cheeks, but she didn't correct Sonya as she nibbled the toast.

"Glad he found you. His Grace is a good man. Did a lot for me and Bartholomew after they came home. Not sure we'd have made it otherwise."

"Duke Erembour is regularly underestimated," Aurora agreed.

"Aye, that he is."

"What did he do for you and Bartholomew?"

"Bartholomew had a lotta trouble holding down steady work when he came home. Started fallin' in with the wrong sorts. His Grace

stepped in, gave him the position looking after these wolfhounds. Bartholomew always was good with animals."

"And Duke Erembour knew that," Aurora murmured.

Of course he did.

He always knew those kinds of things about people. It was probably what made him so good at whatever he'd done in France, and it was why he'd amassed one of the largest fortunes in England.

"We been happily out here almost a year now. Finally feel like Bartholomew's really come home." Sonya almost choked on the words.

Aurora touched the other woman's hand. "He's very lucky to have you."

"And I to have 'im. Which is why I am so glad His Grace found you. You look at 'im the way I did at Bartholomew all those years ago."

"I…" Aurora stammered.

"Ah, no need to be shy. He's your husband. It's how you should look at 'im." Sonya grinned. "And while he'll act like he don't, he needs someone to look at 'im like that."

Before Aurora could say anything in return, the front door opened. Duke Erembour and Bartholomew entered.

The duke's face was expressionless, but Bartholomew's expression was tight.

Sonya frowned. "Something's happened. His Grace's horses all right?"

"They are fine, but we will need to head out as soon as Lady Aurora has finished her breakfast," the duke said.

Aurora pushed her plate away. "What's happened?"

"Nothing for anyone to worry about." He clapped Bartholomew on the shoulder. "Thank you again for your hospitality. Perhaps when that litter of pups comes due, you could arrange to have one sent to Lady Aurora."

Bartholomew's face brightened. "Yes, Yer Grace, I will do that."

Duke Erembour offered Aurora his arm, and she accepted it. He led her out to the carriage that was already loaded and waiting for them.

They said their farewells to Bartholomew and Sonya, and once the carriage was back on the road again, Aurora glanced back at the cottage. "Are they going to be all right?"

"I believe so."

It wasn't a "yes", but it also meant he wasn't lying to her. "What happened?"

"The dogs were stalking someone last night. Whoever it was chose not to tangle with a pack of Irish Wolfhounds."

"Dogs that used to hunt down wolves? I wouldn't mess with them,

either."

"Which is why I chose for us to spend the night at Bartholomew's home. But whoever they are, they now know that you are with me, and my destination is obvious."

"You think they'll try to waylay us?"

"Perhaps. Or they will strike when we stop."

A shudder wracked her, and Aurora closed her eyes. This entire affair had been for nothing. Whoever it was still chased them. The only bright spot was that at least they weren't after her brother.

"How skilled of a rider are you?" Kane asked.

"I've been riding with my brother since we were children."

"Can you ride astride?"

"I never tried it," she admitted. "My father was progressive on certain things, but not that."

"Unfortunate. We will have to teach you once we arrive at Riverwood."

"Such things are unwise for ladies."

Lord Erembour grunted his derision. "A rule I am certain was made up to force women into a far inferior saddle that provides less control over a horse. I promise you that the female anatomy is not unsuited to riding astride. It may even be more suitable."

Aurora didn't argue. Her reputation was already in tatters. She may as well learn to ride astride.

~

Kane drew the curtains on the carriage, then offered Aurora his hand. She took it, and he moved across to her side and sat down beside her. He knew he shouldn't, but he wrapped an arm around her and tucked her close anyway.

A soft sigh escaped her as she eased against him.

He should not feel so comfortable having her so close. She should not feel so comfortable being so close to him.

Yet, he couldn't deny either of their reactions.

"Thank you for helping us," she whispered. "I'm not certain Francis and I would have ever made it home safely if not for your assistance."

"Do not underestimate Duke Aegir, but this is a safer route."

"Can you tell me about what you and he did in the war?"

Kane could, but he didn't want to. Some things were better left unsaid. But there were a few things he could tell her, and it would be enough to make his point.

When he'd finished, he stared down at her. "If you want to move back to the other side of the carriage, I understand."

"Am I bothering you?"

"Not at all. I just assumed…"

"Silly man. I don't dislike you for all you sacrificed on my and the rest of England's behalf. Based on the little you've told me, I imagine your work was more dangerous than most soldier's and more personal. It couldn't have been easy."

He paused.

No one had ever phrased it that way to him.

They'd called it a necessary evil, perhaps, but most focused on how dishonorable his actions were and what it said of him to engage in them. Not even his mentors in Whitehall had ever really discussed what it meant to him personally.

She turned her face up to him, her eyes large and luminous in the dim light.

Kane thumbed over her lips. "I promised to bring you to Riverwood unharmed, including your reputation."

"That is already broken beyond repair, and you did give me my first kiss. You promised me a second. Would it really be so scandalous to give it to me?"

"Yes." Kane touched his lips to hers anyway, reveling in her soft intake of breath, in the way she wrapped her arms around him, the way she pressed closer to him.

If he did not know how innocent she was, he would be tempted to tumble her there. Take her and ease the ache building in them both.

But she was an innocent, and he had made a promise.

He teased the nape of her neck and stroked down her spine. He then cupped her breast, hefting it through the thick fabric of her gown as he thumbed over the pert tip.

His name fell from her lips, and she held him tighter.

Her first time would not be in a carriage.

No, that required more planning on his part to ease her discomfort. But there were other things he could do, other pleasures he could show her.

He angled his head over hers as he deepened the kiss, parting her lips and claiming her mouth. She met him, matched him, wrapped her arms around him and pressed closer.

Having her so warm and eager in his arms was straining his willpower.

Why did his cool detachment abandon him whenever she was near?

He eased her onto his lap, quenching his need to touch, to taste, to take.

She was soon breathless in his arms, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she offered him all he wanted.

He stroked her knee and gently teased his fingertips along the inside of her thigh.

She stiffened in his arms, and he withdrew his hand.

"I'm sorry. I-"

He touched a finger to her lips. "I never want anything you are not happy to give. Ever. You mean far too much to me."

"I'm not planning to marry, but I'm still curious."

"There are far better places than a carriage to quench that curiosity, and far better men to quench it with."

She stared at him with her heavy-lidded eyes, her lips still swollen from their kisses. "But I've never wanted anyone else to teach me."

Kane had no words.

He simply stared at Lady Aurora, her guilelessness almost felling him. That she could be giving him that which he most wanted… but she wasn't.

She was only giving him part of what he wanted, and he cursed himself.

He could not have her.

Not the way he wanted.

Damn the Vestra curse and damn him for succumbing to it.

If he ever had any doubts that he was in love with Lady Aurora, they were gone. But her happiness meant more to him than anything, even his own.

"Once you are safe, we will see if that is still what you desire."

"Promise?"

"Yes." It would be a far easier promise to keep than the one he'd made to her brother, though it was odd that he had made so many promises at all.

A smile curved her lips as she lay her head against his shoulder. "You remind me of the boy in one of the French fairy stories my brother brought home for me. Though, hopefully, you'll have a happier ending."

"Interesting. I didn't know your brother brought anything home from France."

"It's the only thing he did. A street child was selling it, so he bought it shortly before he left. He figured a child's book was not looting, and the images are captivating. My French is not as good as it should be, but it has pushed me to study more."

"My French is excellent. Perhaps you would allow me to read it to you."

"Only if you promise to teach me. There are some unusual colloquialisms and turns of phrase."

She meant it.

No fear. No guile.

No agenda other than learning and learning from him.

By God, it took all his strength not to give her what she asked for. To teach her all she wanted to learn. To lay her back and take her, to fill her and make her his, even if just for a moment.

He wanted this, wanted her.

And he wanted her forever.

Damn it, damn it all to hell.

He had spent his whole life living with the consequences of the Vestra curse, that he should now succumb to it…

But he hadn't succumbed completely, not yet.

He could still walk away from this, as he had the last time the curse had reared its head.

Back so many years ago when his rival's little sister had asked him to dance with her instead of asking her brother.

He'd been shocked.

No one ever wanted to dance with him over the Duke of Aegir. No one ever wanted to dance with him, particularly not the young lady that he had tormented through most of her youth just to get her to talk to him.

But Lady Aurora had wanted to dance with him anyway, and when he hadn't asked her, she had told him to ask her in her innocent way.

Kane had been so surprised that he had.

She was the only lady he had ever danced with in all of England.

And she'd managed to get him to dance with her again.

To walk with her in the gardens.

To take tea with her.

He wanted all of that and more. He wanted to read with her. To spend long evenings with her. To wake up beside her.

She challenged him, delighted him, and more than any of that, she saw him for him.

Not Duke Erembour.

Not the spymaster that had helped fell France.

But the boy that had wanted to dance even though he was too serious and formal. The man that disliked tea and cakes, so she served coffee and sandwiches.

Maybe she could even see him as the fool who loved her and wanted more than a few stolen moments in a carriage.

She had given him what he wanted, sometimes what he needed, repeatedly, and without thought for herself.

Dancing with him.

Making certain things he liked were served.

Were her kisses any different? Was her curled up in his arms any

different? Was she simply giving him what he wanted because he wanted it?

No, that was not who Lady Aurora was.

She was kind, yes. And that would explain some of her actions. But kindness didn't explain the heat in her kisses, her breathless gasps, or the way she held him.

He hoped.

She trailed her fingertips across his cheek. "Have I done something wrong? You look pensive."

"Everything about you is perfect. Almost too perfect."

A smile curved her lips. "Now I know you're flattering me."

"I have no need." He paused as he stared at her in his arms. "Lady Aurora, I-"

Before he could finish the sentence, a shot rang out, shattering both windows.

Kane cursed as he dragged Aurora to the floor and covered her body with his.

A second shot followed, and Aurora buried her scream in his chest.

The horses bolted, racing down the road as the carriage rocked and swayed wildly behind them.

Curses followed, and the coppery scent of blood salted the air.

His men fought to bring the hoses back under control as the broken glass crunched around him and Lady Aurora. Kane held her close as he braced them both against the side of the carriage.

He grit his teeth.

When he found who was attacking them, Kane would make them beg for death.

He thought of a thousand tortures, each more horrific than the last. He would send a message that Lady Aurora was not to be touched, not to be hurt, or the consequences would be dire.

But that would have to wait.

At the moment, he needed to keep them both alive and get Aurora to the safety of Riverwood.

Kane waited.

It would take time to reload a rifle. Approximately three minutes if the man were skilled, and Kane believed he was.

Two shots meant he was carrying two rifles. Or there was more than one assassin.

The first shot might have killed them, and the second was to breed commotion. The shooter had most likely targeted either one of the horses or the driver.

Now, the assassin would still have to make certain they were dead.

No, make certain Aurora was dead.

Kane gripped her tighter. They were not going to take her. No

matter what he had to do to keep her.

Chapter 18

Aurora wanted to cry, but she had no tears.

No voice.

Nothing.

Duke Erembour lifted his head and glanced toward the window. She could hear nothing over the pounding of horses' hooves and the shouting of men.

Her stomach lurched as the carriage tilted again.

Duke Erembour held her tightly against his chest and slammed both of their weight to the other side, righting the carriage again. He then gently lay his hand on her back to keep her close to the floor as he lifted the seat cushions and revealed a compartment beneath. He withdrew a pair of polished and elegant pistols.

Her breath caught in her throat, but she knew it was common to carry them to ward off highwaymen. Still, she had never thought they would need such a thing on the safe country roads with the bright morning sun warming them.

Duke Erembour again lay above her, protecting her. He leaned forward so she could hear his whispered words. "One of two things will happen. The carriage will keep going, in which case the driver will get us to safety."

"Or?" The word choked from her chest.

"Or it will stop because he is dead or was thrown from his seat."

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"If the carriage stops, you must stay down. No matter what else happens, you must stay down. Do you understand?"

Aurora glanced at the pistols in his hands and nodded.

"You must trust me and stay down."

"I will." She trusted him completely. Had trusted him to bring her safely to his home, had slept in his arms, had kissed him.

What she couldn't bear was to lose him.

Not that he was hers to lose.

But she would never forgive herself if he died protecting her.

Aurora closed her eyes and laid her cheek on the hard carriage floor, cursing herself for being thankful Duke Erembour was with her,

safe and protective above her. But he could die just as easily as so many others had fighting for king and country.

Anger and frustration welled up within her. He couldn't die now. Not after all he had survived to come home.

But who would target her like this?

Who would want her dead this much?

There may have been a few young ladies or their mothers jealous of her dowry or her family connections, but certainly not enough to wish her dead.

It had to be someone hoping to use her to get to Francis. Hoping she would be the key to whatever secrets he may have accumulated during the war.

Things he still wouldn't tell even her.

If that was their aim, returning to Aegir lands would not keep them safe and alive. Nor would London.

Not even Scotland or Ireland would offer a refuge.

They either had to figure out who was behind it and deal with them directly, figure out what they wanted and expose it, or live forever under guard.

Aurora balled her hands into fists.

If she survived the day, Francis would teach her to shoot a pistol. She would learn to ride astride. She never wanted to feel so powerless, so vulnerable, and so much of a burden to those she loved again.

Aurora squeezed her eyes closed at the thought.

She certainly meant her brother.

Not the awkward and silent boy that had glowered at her brother from across the room at so many events. Not the youth that had given her frogs. The one she'd had to convince to ask her to dance when she'd already had a line of young men clamoring for the privilege.

Not the man who disliked sweet things, but still had memorized all of Shakespeare's sonnets.

No, love was the gentle river her parents had floated side-by-side on together, not the rapids-filled torment that life with Duke Erembour would be.

A rapids-filled torment that had him shielding her with his own body as he prepared to shoot a man to protect her.

The thought nearly choked her, but the slowing of the carriage forced her attention to the door. She whispered a silent prayer for the driver.

Duke Erembour lay a gentle finger to her lips.

The carriage finally halted, and silence surrounded her. She strained her senses, desperately wanting to hear something, but all that greeted her was the whinny of the horses and the impatient stamp of their feet.

Duke Erembour tensed above her, coiled like a viper preparing to strike. Aurora pressed her fist to her mouth, biting down on her fingers to keep her scream contained.

Another moment passed, and another.

Still she waited.

The silence stretched, and as much as Aurora tried, she couldn't hear whatever it was he waited for.

But she remained silent and trusted him.

Without warning, Lord Kane bolted up faster than a cobra, threw open the door, leveled his pistol, and pulled the trigger.

A deafening roar filled the carriage, and Aurora wasn't certain if she screamed or not as she couldn't hear anything past the ringing in her ears.

A moment later, Duke Erembour pulled her into his arms and stroked her hair.

"It's all right now," he promised.

She nodded as she held him, squeezing her eyes closed as she buried her face against his shoulder. He said nothing more, and he held her as the ringing in her ears subsided.

But the coppery scent of blood intensified.

"Is it over?" she asked.

"For the moment."

It wasn't a "yes".

She held him tighter.

Aurora had no idea how long they had been on the side of the road when the sound of horses had her lifting her head.

Duke Erembour eased her back into the carriage as he watched and waited. Finally, he nodded once, then waved to the group of men.

They stopped beside the carriage, and the lead rider climbed off his horse and bowed to Duke Erembour.

"We came as soon as we received your message, Your Grace."

Duke Erembour pointed, but he positioned himself in such a way that Aurora couldn't see past him to where he pointed. "Search him. See if you can find anything useful."

The man snapped a salute, then hurried over to where Aurora imagined the body must be.

Duke Erembour assumed command of the situation, barking orders as the contingent of men scrambled to obey them.

This was him, she realized.

A powerful man, a man in control of himself, the situation, and those around him. If he ever lost control, he would fight to regain it.

As he had with the man that had threatened them.

The man that now lay dead in grass.

He would never want to spend life floating gently down a river

hand-in-hand with anyone. No, his plan to hire a chatelaine was perfect. He could end her employment if she didn't please him, if she didn't manage his households well.

Duke Erembour would marry another woman to bear his heirs. He would not love her, nor would he want to love her. He probably wouldn't even love his children.

They served a purpose.

To carry on the Vestra line, and he would raise them to be excellent stewards of the Erembour lands and the people on them.

Aurora almost felt sympathy for children he didn't yet have. She prayed the woman he married had enough compassion for both of them.

Their children would need it.

Not that any of it was Aurora's concerns.

She owed him a debt for saving her life, and she would see it paid. Once she had done that, she would avoid Lord Kane Vestra for the rest of their lives. It was better for both of them if she did so.

Maybe not both of them, but it was certainly better for her.

"Your Grace," the man called from near where Aurora suspected the assailant's body was. "You need to see this."

Duke Erembour glowered at the man, then nodded toward another. "See to Lady Vonne. Make certain she is safe and comfortable."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Duke Erembour squeezed Aurora's hand. "I will be right back. Brandt will stay with you."

"Thank you," she murmured.

The duke dipped his head, then strode over to where the other man was. Brandt moved to block her view the moment Lord Vestra walked away.

Aurora had to smile.

She knew better than trying to trick him into moving. She didn't really want to see what was out there, and she didn't want to get him into trouble.

"We brought along watered wine, dried fruit, fresh bread, and some other things," Brandt offered as he shuffled in front of her.

"Thank you. That was kind of you." Aurora gave him her prettiest ballroom smile, even though it wobbled a bit under the current circumstances.

Brandt blushed. "Of course, milady. His Grace was real adamant about seeing to your comfort. Strange, as he normally doesn't care about that sort of thing. Maybe because you're a lady and all."

"Perhaps. How do you know Duke Erembour?"

"Didn't work with him personally in France, but I heard of him. And when I needed work, well, folks said he was well disposed

towards those that had served."

Aurora's smile softened. "Yes, he is."

"You're not what any of us expected."

"How so?"

Before Brandt could say anything further, Duke Erembour returned and dismissed him. "We must continue on to Riverwood."

"Is the carriage fit to make the journey, or will I have to ride?"

"The men should have the new team harnessed in a moment. They will be accompanying us the rest of the way."

"Not that I'm upset they're here to help, but where did they come from?"

"Riverwood. I sent for them last night, requesting that they meet us on our journey home. The perpetrators are professionals. They knew I would send for backup, and they calculated when that backup would reach us. They set up their strike before the reinforcements would have the chance to rendezvous with us."

"Professionals? But, how do you know?"

"Doesn't matter, but I am now certain this is about Duke Aegir. There is no possible way you would have had contact with these people, much less angered them. Now that I know that, I will have to speak to him in much more detail about what happened after we parted ways in France."

"Will he be able to avoid them alone?"

"They sent two of their three-man team after us. The man who shot the rifles, and the man who chased us."

"If you killed the one that pursued us, that means there are two still out there." Aurora hiccuped on the words.

"Which is why we must go now, if you are ready."

Aurora wasn't ready at all, but she nodded anyway.

Brandt brought over a satchel, bowed, and handed it to Duke Erembour. Duke Erembour situated it within the carriage, then gently guided Aurora to the other side of the conveyance and out into the grass as Brandt cleaned out the broken glass.

Aurora's legs wobbled beneath her, but Lord Vestra's hand at her waist helped stabilize her.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. She glanced back at the carriage that still shielded the body of their assailant and shuddered.

"No need to be. You have responded remarkably well to all that has happened. Remember, all of us have been to France and back. This is your first experience with such things."

"Thank you." Aurora allowed herself to lean against him as she stared back down the road. "What happened to the driver?"

Lord Kane paused.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

“Yes. I am sorry.”

“Did he have a wife? Family?” Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of the man that may have died because of her.

Because he had been helping Duke Erembour get her to safety.

And all for what? What did these people want?

She would tell them anything she knew to save men like their driver. Men that had done nothing wrong.

Aurora balled her fists.

But she didn’t know anything.

She was a pawn they were using to get to her brother.

Duke Erembour turned her towards him and held her close.

He made no promises that everything would be okay. He simply held her, and she clung to him. Her rock in the emotional storm that ravaged her.

Her tears soaked his jacket and rumpled his cravat, but he said nothing as he rubbed her back.

After a time, he lifted her and carried her back to the carriage. Settling down on the seat, he kept her wrapped in his arms even as the carriage lurched into motion. The gentle breeze ruffled through the drawn curtains and reminded her that the windows had been shot out and at least two men were dead.

She held Duke Erembour tighter.

“I’m here,” he whispered. “I will keep you safe.”

But who would keep him safe?

Chapter 19

The sun had set by the time they reached Riverwood, the massive house that was as much a fortress as it was a manor. While many of the renovations Kane had made improved the comfort of living there, it still looked like something out of a child's fairy story and was just as secure.

Kane would defend it accordingly.

He had already issued orders to the men that had met them along the road. A handful had ridden on ahead, and they would have already secured the perimeter and set up guard rotations.

Kane employed dozens of footmen.

He would finally have a use for them.

Lady Aurora stirred beside him as they rode up to Riverwood, her gaze fixed on the massive stronghold. He already knew it was nothing like the manor she had grown up in.

Kane had visited her ancestral home a handful of times, and he had always been astounded by the differences.

But the Duchess of Aegir had been in residence then, and he had sensed her influence in many things. It would not surprise him if somehow all of Aegir holdings were brighter because of her.

Or at least because of her influence on the Duke of Aegir.

A female influence Erembour lands had been denied because of him.

The carriage stopped in front of the wide front steps, and Kane stepped out.

He turned back to Lady Aurora. "We're home."

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "And is that the ocean I hear?"

"A lake. A large one," Kane said.

"Do you fish?"

"I have not since I was a boy, though I remember being proficient at it."

"Perhaps you can teach me some time."

"I… would like that." And he meant it. The idea of spending an afternoon walking along the craggy path with her was far more appealing that it should be. "But it will have to wait until we are

certain you are safe."

"I look forward to it."

Kane offered her his arm, and when she took it, he laid his hand over top of hers. Her fingers fluttered under his, but she didn't try to draw them back. Instead, she turned her face up to him and rewarded him with her brilliant, genuine smile.

He sucked in a breath.

Yes, he was afflicted with the Vestra curse. Now, he had to figure out what to do about it. And he had more than a few ideas.

Kane guided Lady Aurora inside and called for his head housekeeper. "Assign Lady Aurora a lady's maid while we wait for hers. The footmen are bringing in her trunks. See to it that a hot bath is drawn for her and a light repast is brought up before she retires."

The housekeeper curtsied and hid a smile as she turned to do his bidding.

Kane frowned, but he didn't have time to dwell on his housekeeper. He needed to see Aurora safe and comfortable, then he needed to write to Whitehall. What they had discovered was far worse than anything he'd suspected.

The assailant's skill was warning enough, but the tattoo on his arm confirmed Kane's worst fears.

Kane turned to Lady Aurora. "You will be safe here. My housekeeper is going to see to your needs. If you need anything, anything at, my staff will come get me. But rest now, and we'll talk more in the morning."

"Is my brother here?"

"He won't arrive until tomorrow at the earliest."

Lady Aurora stared down at her slippers. "I'm worried."

"I have already sent a contingent of men to intercept him. We will get him here safely."

"Then what?"

That was the question, but he didn't yet have the answer. "We'll talk more in the morning. You trusted me before. Will you trust me again?"

She stared up at him with her brilliant blue eyes and smiled. "Always."

The simple word, offered so honestly, nearly leveled him.

He needed time to think, time to plan, and he needed distance from her. Everything muddied in her presence except his need for her.

That crystalized.

"There's my housekeeper now," Kane said as the older woman lingered at the edge of the hall. "She will see you to your room."

"Thank you, for everything," Aurora whispered and hugged him.

He stilled under her embrace, then closed his eyes and held her

tightly against him, terrified for a moment that if he let her go, he'd discover she was a phantom and had never been there at all.

When he opened his eyes again, she was still there, still with him, and still wrapped in his arms. He cursed himself as he forced himself to release her.

"Sleep well, Lady Aurora."

She smiled at him, her beautiful, genuine smile that would have warmed the great room on a frozen winter night, then left with the housekeeper.

Damn the Vestra curse.

Kane turned away, his hands balled into fists at his sides.

He was making a fool of himself, but he couldn't stop. He was in love with her, even though Lady Aurora was not at Riverwood because of him.

Did not love him in return.

And would only marry him if forced to in order to save her place in society.

He would do well to remember that Lady Aurora was there because someone was trying to kill her.

And that someone was the infamous French Ouroboros Society. Kane did not know how long the society had existed, though its hand in the Troubles was obvious. Still, that they had sent operatives after Lady Aurora was ominous, to say the least.

Whatever Duke Aegir knew was something that even those at the top of the French ministry did not want anyone else to know. Enough that they were willing to send some of their best to silence him.

Though it made even less sense to Kane as to why they would have sent someone after Lady Aurora.

Unless there was something Duke Aegir knew that the French were desperate to learn, though Kane could not imagine what that was. He was aware of all the secrets that had funneled through to Duke Aegir, and none of them had been worth a strike by Ouroboros during the war, much less now.

There were few who had information so valuable, though Kane was one of them.

He shook his head.

There was more to it. There was always more where Ouroboros was concerned. But for the moment, Lady Aurora was safe.

And he would keep her that way.

He paced through Riverwood as his thoughts swirled, subconsciously investigating every shadow.

While he could and would protect Lady Aurora's life, he still did not have a way forward for himself.

Even now, he was not certain he could walk away from her unless

she asked it of him.

Damn the Vestra curse and damn his own lack of control.

He was snared.

Lying to himself was foolish.

He loved her.

Yes, he stupidly, foolishly, loved her.

And while Lady Aurora was with him for the moment, she would leave and return home as soon as her brother arrived.

Unless he could convince her to stay with him. To love him as he loved her. By God, he would do almost anything to make that happen.

But it wasn't his to control, his to demand, and that's what rankled more than anything.

She may never love him, but at least he could try.

Even if it meant writing bad poetry.

But first, he had to send a message to Whitehall. Then a request to the Bishop of Canterbury.

~

Exhausted, Aurora followed the housekeeper up to a grand and spacious room that already had a tub full of steaming water in the center of it. While the room itself was large, and everything in it boasted the most expensive and luxurious of fabrics, something about it felt dated and unused.

She smiled. Of course it did. It wasn't as if Duke Erembour entertained much, and he was only recently home from France.

The heavy walls were brightened with lovely tapestries, and she trailed a finger over the sturdy stone. Aurora understood Lord Vestra's desire to get to Riverwood now more than ever. His home was as much a fortress as it was a manor house, perched high above a lake as it was and complete with soaring turrets.

Still, the inside was warm and comfortable, the fresh fire in the hearth chasing away the spring chill as the warm bath called to her.

"Marissa will be with you in a moment, Your Grace." The housekeeper bobbed a curtsy and left Aurora alone.

Aurora didn't bother to correct the housekeeper that she was not "Your Grace". She was the sister of a duke, not a duchess herself.

Not that it mattered.

Such things could be dealt with later. Right now, she wanted a bath and to sleep in a real bed.

Marissa appeared after a moment, and the petite maid helped

Aurora out of her traveling dress and into the steaming water. She then brought in some richly scented soap and hurried out again to check on Aurora's trunks.

When the maid returned, she was carrying Aurora's nightgown and brush.

"Thank you," Aurora murmured as she sunk deeper into the already cooling water.

The maid bobbed a curtsey and set about carrying in things from the trunk and tucking them away. Aurora had no idea how long Duke Erembour planned for her to stay at Riverwood, but she didn't want to cause the young woman any troubles with him. It would not take that much effort to repack in a day or two.

But if the staff felt her stay was going to be long enough to completely unpack, it meant His Grace was worried. That did nothing to ease the gnawing cold in Aurora's stomach.

As the water finally cooled to the point Aurora was shivering, she slipped out of the tub and dried herself. Marissa then helped brush out her hair. The lady's maid frowned at the nightgown, but she shrugged and helped Aurora into it.

"Will there be anything else you need tonight, Your Grace?"

"No, thank you," Aurora said as she fought back a yawn. She would explain to both the housekeeper and Marissa she was simply "my lady" instead of "Your Grace" in the morning.

Aurora climbed into the soft bed and cuddled up to the warming stone. The pillows were plump beneath her head, and her eyelids were heavy, but every footstep, every creek, every rustle of wind had her wide awake again.

Aurora hugged a pillow to herself. The events of the past several days all weighed down on her at once, and despite the softness of the bed, she felt as if she were being crushed beneath them.

She was too old for such flights of fancy, but she was also too terrified to sleep.

Chapter 20

It was far later than he would have preferred when Kane finally dragged himself to the ducal chambers. He still had no answers to his initial questions, but he had managed to devise a half-dozen more questions.

He needed rest and a fresh perspective.

As he entered the ducal suite, a dim light filtered in from the room adjacent to his.

His mother's chambers.

But they hadn't been occupied in the nearly thirty years since she'd died.

He searched his room for a weapon, but a part of him knew that even if an assassin had broken into his home, they wouldn't have lit a fire and be having a cup of tea.

Still, he crept forward and gently pushed open the door to the duchess's chambers.

Lady Aurora sat up in bed, her golden hair tumbling around her shoulders, and her eyes wide and glassy.

He sprinted to her bedside. "Are you all right?"

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her head against his shoulder. Kane settled her against him and held her close.

The events of the day were always worse at night, something he knew too well.

Still, as he held her and glanced around his mother's room, realization dawned. His staff assumed Lady Aurora was his wife. They had even put her in the duchess's suite beside his own rooms.

He closed his eyes as he leaned his temple against her forehead.

If his staff was acting like this, he could only imagine what the dowagers would say.

"Lady Aurora," he whispered.

"Please, don't go." Her voice was barely a whisper as she held him.

He stroked her hair. "I won't, though I fear things are worse than even I anticipated."

"My brother-"

"I have yet to receive word, and that is a good thing." He gently

rubbed her back as he held her close. “I fear my staff believes you are my wife. This is the duchess’s suite. If they believe that…”

“My reputation is obliterated. As Hamlet would say, ‘Get thee to a nunnery.’”

There was no laughter or light in her words, and Kane hugged her. He would give her the world, if she would but take it from him. “I will give you my name as protection, absolve you of all sin in society’s eyes, and make you a duchess.”

She stared up at him with her luminous blue eyes. “You have given me my life. I couldn’t ask you to give up so much more for me.”

“I did say I planned to marry an orphan.” He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

A soft sigh escaped from her, and Aurora slid her arms around him as she kissed him back. He held her close, reveling in the softness of her, in the fresh scent of soap that clung to her, in the eagerness of her fingers as she slid them under his jacket.

He slid out of the constricting garment, and she smiled against his lips as she teased along his shoulders and down the front of his chest. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his waistcoat, but she soon had them undone and was stroking up beneath his shirt and across his bare flesh.

Kane suppressed a growl as her fingernails grazed over his abdomen and along the broad expanse of his chest.

“Aurora,” he breathed as she continued to touch and explore him.

“Didn’t you say something about there being better places than a carriage? And we are safe at Riverwood.”

Her whisper teased across him, and he grit his teeth.

But he was a victim of the Vestra curse.

She had but to ask him for anything, and he would do all in his considerable power to give it to her.

And there were things he could do to satisfy her curiosity without taking her virginity.

At least not yet.

She was curious. Not only did he understand it, but it heightened his own desire.

He eased back from the kiss and thumbed over her lips, waiting for her to pause and look up at him. “If I ever do anything that frightens you, that hurts you, or you want me to stop for any reason, I will. Your happiness is the most important thing.”

She smiled up at him. “I’ll tell you. I promise.”

He leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers again.

She parted them and offered him her mouth.

An offer he took, finding her tongue with his and stroking.

She held him tightly as she kissed him back.

He feasted, allowing himself to revel in the pleasure of the kiss and the sensation of her warm and eager in his arms.

He stroked her through her nightgown, cupping her soft breasts and teasing his thumb over her pert nipples.

A soft whimper escaped her, and she arched her back, filling his hands with her.

Kane eased back from the kiss long enough to lift her nightgown up over her head and toss it away. Then he settled her back into his arms and reveled in the feel of her naked body against him.

She was so soft, so beautiful. He traced a reverent hand across her shoulder, down the swell of her breast, and over the curve of her hip.

She shuddered and pressed closer to him.

"I'm sorry. I…" He sounded like an awestruck and foolish youth.

"I'm just cold," she whispered as she pressed closer to him. "I like the way you touch me. It makes me feel things I've never felt before."

Her words arrowed through him, and Kane wanted to show her all the pleasure he could lavish on her, all that could be between them. He sucked in a breath as he framed her face in his hands and kissed her.

Aurora kissed him back, pressing close as she did. She tugged his shirt up so she could touch her bare breasts to his chest. A sigh escaped her as she gently rubbed her nipples against him.

Kane bit back a growl as he deepened the kiss, taking her mouth fully as he lifted her slightly and let her drop across him, teasing her breasts across his chest.

The silk of her skin, the fullness of her lips, the wet heat between her thighs beckoned to him.

His trousers became uncomfortably tight, but he ignored it as he worked to intensify her pleasure.

Aurora explored his chest, his shoulders, her fingers gentle and searching as she ceded her mouth to him in kiss after kiss.

Kane held her, caressed her, and learned the places that elicited soft sighs or quiet moans. He stroked along the smooth column of her thighs, pausing at their juncture, then dipping between.

She gasped as he touched her, coating his finger in her wetness as he teased her tender slit and nubbin.

Aurora bucked her hips against his hand, and a quiet moan escaped her. "Yes, like that. Please, touch me there again."

A satisfied smile curved his lips, and he did so, rubbing and stroking as her hips raised and fell to meet him, to match him.

It was the prelude to a dance as old as mankind, one he wanted to teach her.

But that would wait.

First, he wanted to show her the pleasure that could be between

them.

He continued stroking her nubbin as he slid a finger inside of her.

Aurora tightened her grip on his shoulders even as she parted herself wider for him. She didn't have the words to beg him for her release, but he knew what he'd built within her.

Knew what she wanted.

What she needed.

And he gave it to her.

He held her against him as his other hand stroked her most intimate of places, pushing her higher, building the tension within her until her whole body thrummed with it.

"Kane, please," she begged, though she couldn't know what she begged him for.

He did, and he gave it, drawing out her pleasure until her whole body tensed around his hand, then she slumped against him, her body soft as wave after wave of fulfilled pleasure shook her.

"Kane," she whispered, and his name on her lips was the greatest aphrodisiac.

Holding her close, he slid into bed beside her. He ached for her, wanted to fill her, to tap her depths and know her most intimate of embraces.

But he could wait.

She was still a virgin, but she was a lot less innocent. His house staff thought she was his duchess, and with luck, he might very well convince her to accept the role.

Kane closed his eyes as he cradled her against him.

He was well and truly cursed.

Chapter 21

Aurora awoke, and Kane was still beside her.

Kane.

It was too intimate to call him by his name, yet he'd saved her life. Twice. And after all that had happened between them, it seemed like they should be on more intimate terms.

Still, it was difficult to think of him as such. Not because she didn't want to, but because he didn't seem to want her to.

Aurora smiled as she stroked a hand along his chest, enjoying the heat of him, his firm masculine skin, the light tickle of hair.

"I should go before I get caught in here. It will be difficult enough to explain to my staff that you are not my duchess."

"This really is the duchess's suite?"

"Yes."

A strange sense of satisfaction settled deep within her. She didn't understand it, and she didn't want to. Aurora traced a hand down his chest again. She didn't want him to go. "I'd feel safer if you were with me."

"I am not certain you would be safe if I stay. Certainly your reputation wouldn't be."

"I… we…"

"We did not. You are still untouched, though perhaps not as innocent."

"I-"

He touched a finger to her lips. "Do not tempt either of us. It is very possible your brother will demand I marry you before all of this is through to save your standing in society."

"I… won't let him." She stared down at the bedclothes that covered her, knowing she was naked beneath.

"I do not blame you. Life with me would not be easy. It's why I plan to marry an orphan."

"And hire a chatelaine?"

"Yes."

Aurora trailed a finger down his broad shoulders as she pillowed her head on his chest. "It wouldn't be easy, but it would be

interesting."

"You are being kind, as you so often are."

"I am being honest. I like talking to you. Maybe, if I'm ever allowed into a ballroom again, you'll even dance with me." She tried to keep her tone light, flippant, but the sadness crept in anyway.

Kane sat up and turned her to face him. "Damn it, Aurora, marry me. I need a wife, and you need to salvage your reputation."

"But you don't love me."

"Love has nothing to do with marriage. I need a mother for my children and someone to oversee my household. That you also read Shakespeare is a bonus." He raked a hand through his hair. "You wanted to marry for love, but that has been denied you. Settle for what will keep you in society's good graces."

Aurora framed his face in her hands and met his bright green gaze. She touched her lips to his. "You are not settling."

He stiffened, then he wrapped her in his arms and pulled her into a hungry kiss. "Then marry me."

It was not at all how she'd envisioned being proposed to, but somehow, it fit Duke Erembour.

Marry him.

Did she want to marry him? Life with him would not be easy, but it would be worth it. He spoke to her as an equal, treated her as if she had a brain in her head, and he clearly desired her.

As she desired him.

But as age faded physical desire, Lord Kane Vestra was a man she could respect and love for who he was. No, he would never write her sonnets, but he would hold her at night when she was afraid. He would care for her. He would see to her needs as well as his own.

But would all she felt for him haunt her when he was unwilling or unable to return it?

She didn't know.

But she at least had to try.

Being shot at twice in as many days had taught her how fleeting life was and how important it was to seize every opportunity that came to her.

And foolish as it was, she loved him.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips.

He eased back from her even as his arms tightened around her, almost as if he were afraid she'd escape him.

But she wasn't going anywhere.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I will marry you. On one condition."

His bright green gaze locked with hers. "And what is that?"

"That you will at least try to care about me. I couldn't bear a

traditional society marriage where you ignore me at best and hold me in contempt at worst. Even if you never love me, at least we could be friends."

"You have my word." Kane framed her face in his hands and kissed her softly, gently, as if she were the most important thing in the world.

His mouth claimed hers, and she gave herself over to him as he pressed her close.

"I want you, Aurora," he whispered. "I have wanted you for so long."

She heard the need in his words, the desire.

And it matched her own.

It was a heady rush to know she affected him so, to know she could make him feel as much as she did.

She wanted this, wanted him, wanted all that he made her feel. No, it would never be a gentle ride down a river with him, but she would take the rapids as long as he was beside her. Her heart beat faster as the realization intensified the desire flowing through her, the need, and the love.

Kane lay her back, smoothing her hair over the plump white pillow as he trailed kisses over her shoulders and naked breasts. He paused to lave her rosy peaks, drawing each into a hard pebble.

The heat he'd stoked in her before began to rise, and she held his head to her breast, basking in the glorious sensation of his hot mouth and tongue.

Kane trailed his fingertips along the curve of her hips and dipped into the dark triangle of hair at the juncture of her thighs. He stroked her nubbin as he slid a finger into her.

Pleasure poured through her, promising her the same intense completion he had brought her before. Aurora parted her thighs, offering him all he wanted as she gripped the smooth planes of his back and shoulders.

Kane withdrew his finger from her, and Aurora whimpered. Her whole body felt engulfed in flames, aching for him to guide her back to the fields of passion he'd shown her earlier.

She licked her lips, searching for the words to ask for all she wanted.

Perhaps he thought her a wanton or a whore, but if he did, the hungry expression on his face warned he was pleased with it rather than disturbed by it.

Kane kissed her again, then he stripped off his trousers and boots, leaving him as naked as she was.

Aurora stared at his massive cock laying thick and erect against his abdomen. Curious, she reached for it, and Kane didn't stop her.

He was hot in her hand, smooth, dry except for a tiny drop of fluid at the tip. Aurora gently stroked him, and Kane appeared to almost be in pain as he bucked in her hand.

"Minx," he whispered as he rolled her beneath him. "My minx."

Aurora smiled up at him as she threaded her fingers through his dark hair, then teased over his broad shoulders and hard chest.

He slid his knees between hers and parted her, spreading her wide as he coated himself in her wetness. Then he guided himself to her most intimate of openings.

A whisper of fear stole through her. He was so large above her, so hot, so hard. She'd heard the tales of how painful it was, like being split asunder, but her hips writhed beneath him, her whole body all but begging him to fill her.

The pain would be worth it to hold him so close, to feel him inside of her.

Kane kissed her brow, her cheeks, then he parted her and thrust inside of her.

A whimper escaped her as he filled her, stretched her, pushed past the resistance her body put up and seated himself deep within her.

Aurora gasped as she clung to him.

Yes, there was a sting, but more than that was the unbelievable sense of fullness. It amplified all she felt, intensifying the pain but also the pleasure. And while the pain slowly faded, the pleasure only increased, especially when he reached between them and found her nubbin.

He nuzzled her neck, her shoulders, and when the pain finally passed and she was able to relax, he began to move within her.

Aurora gasped as her pleasure built again, pushing her higher and faster.

She wrapped her arms around him and gave herself over to the rising need, following the steps of a dance as old as time.

He tried to ease back from her, but she wouldn't let him. She held him tightly to her as she crested and wave after wave of pure bliss coursed through her.

Kane growled something as he held her tightly against him and lost himself deep inside of her. He touched his forehead to hers, then he lay down beside her and gathered her into his arms.

Aurora laid her head against his chest and wondered, despite the heavy pleasure flowing through her, if she was making the biggest mistake of her life.

~

Kane woke Aurora with a kiss. “I have to leave you now, but sleep. You are safe. Come find me when you wake.”

She smiled up at him and nodded, then fell back asleep.

He sat beside her a moment and cursed himself for being a lovesick fool. Kane tucked the blankets around his fiancée.

His soon to be wife.

He should have the special license by the following day, and the local clergyman could marry them at Riverwood the day he had the license.

He didn’t want to spend one night longer than he had to without Aurora by his side. Without knowing she had the protection of his name and the wealth that went with it.

Kane raked a hand through his hair. No point denying how foolish he was, but as long as he was so foolish, he would at least arrange things as he wanted them.

And that meant marrying Aurora as soon as possible.

He stroked her golden hair as it spread across the pillow, and her lips gently parted in sleep. Kane swallowed hard as he remembered losing himself inside of her.

It had been a long time since he had finished inside of a woman, preferring to withdraw beforehand.

It saved him unnecessary complications and significantly reduced the likelihood of bastards.

But her completion had been too much for him. She was too much for him.

A smile quirked his lips.

He truly suffered from the Vestra curse.

He would love her, marry her, and protect her.

A strange, absolutely foreign giddiness stole through him.

Lady Aurora had agreed to be his wife.

He’d been determined before to keep her alive, now he would stop at nothing to see to her safety.

He closed his eyes as it felt like a dagger being slipped between his ribs.

Yes, he’d succumbed to the Vestra curse. And not only did he love Lady Aurora, but he’d convinced her to marry him. She had even given herself to him, wholly and completely, holding back nothing.

He wanted her like that every night.

Perhaps there had been a way to give her what she wanted, even after everything that had happened, to allow her to marry someone she loved, but Kane hadn’t been able to find it.

Perhaps it was the curse impairing his faculties.

But it was true her reputation had been damaged after the assassination attempts, and not even the Duke of Aegir could completely repair it. If Kane would have tried to help, it would have only fed the scandal.

Lady Aurora deserved better than that.

While she deserved someone she loved, she also deserved the protection of his name. Needed it to maintain her place in society. Many would assume he had arranged the assassination attempts to force her into the marriage.

While nothing could be further from the truth, it was a useful lie he would manipulate for his own ends.

But it still meant Lady Aurora would have to marry him.

He brushed his lips over her forehead as he remembered her one condition. It had been easy to agree to when he was already in love with her. But even if she didn't love him in return, a society marriage would never do for either of them.

If all she wanted was friendship, he would give it to her.

He was foolishly, stupidly, and desperately in love with her.

Perhaps with time, the emotion would fade.

Or, it would intensify, as it had for his father even after his mother had died.

Memories of the old duke assaulted Kane, but none of his mother.

Because he had none.

Because he'd killed her by being born.

Would the same thing happen to Lady Aurora?

Fear gripped him, and Kane balled his fists.

He could not, would not, allow any child to hurt Lady Aurora. Yet, after what they had already done, it was possible, however unlikely, that she was already carrying his child.

Kane raked a hand through his hair.

Even if she wasn't, he couldn't deny her the family she wanted. Couldn't deny her anything.

If she asked him for the moon, he'd find a way to give it to her.

Marrying her was the absolute worst thing he could do, but now that she had agreed, it would take divine intervention for him to walk away from her.

He kissed her again, then retreated down to his office.

He had yet to receive the special license from the Bishop of Canterbury, but he hadn't really expected it. Another day, he told himself, he could wait another day.

Patience was usually one of his strong suits, but on this, he was half-tempted to send for the bishop himself to oversee the ceremony.

Kane opted instead to detail out the provisions he wanted in the

formal marriage contract. Wealth meant little to him beyond the comfort and expedience it could purchase, and he would enjoy showering it on Lady Aurora.

He also wanted things situated so that if anything happened to him, Aurora would inherit anything not directly entailed to the duchy.

His disreputable distant cousin could go to Hell.

Kane's barrister would see to the formal language of the contract, and Kane penned a note to have him investigate the details of Aurora's trust. He wanted something similar if they were ever blessed with any female children.

His daughters were entitled to as many options as male children. It wouldn't be easy, but they would be Vestras and more than a match for any man in England.

They shouldn't have to settle.

Kane's lips quirked.

He finally understood the previous Duke Aegir.

With that taken care of, Kane reviewed the various briefs waiting for him from the men he'd assigned to retrieve the current Duke Aegir, patrol the lands around Riverwood, and guard Lady Aurora.

All of it confirmed what he already knew.

The Ouroboros were after her, though he still couldn't say why.

Even if he destroyed all three operatives they had sent for her, if he didn't cut off the head of the snake, they would simply send more. He had to determine what that head was. What they needed from her that they were willing to send such skilled operatives to get it.

And he needed to figure that out quickly.

Going through the information helped him focus, calmed him, and gave him something to do.

By the time he was on his third cup of coffee, a light knock roused him from his documents.

He frowned, but bid the intruder to enter.

Lady Aurora stood framed in the doorway, the sun haloing around her golden hair.

His breath caught in his throat. Kane had no idea how he had convinced her to marry him or what strange twist of fate forced someone like her to accept his suit, but he knew he was a lucky man.

Standing, he walked over to her and took her hands.

"I explained to your servants I am not your duchess."

"Yet," Kane corrected her.

A smile touched her lips as she turned her brilliant blue gaze up to him. "Yet. Do you want them to move me to another room?"

"No need. It will be yours in less than three days anyway."

"Three days? But it takes three weeks from announcing the Banns."

"I am the Duke of Erembour. It may as well serve me. I have

requested a special license, and I expect it to be granted."

"There won't be time to plan anything."

"It will be just us, your brother, and another witness. My barrister could stand in for that."

She blinked up at him. "I… see."

No, she clearly didn't see that he wanted her to be his wife because he didn't want to spend another night without her beside him.

Because he didn't want her to change her mind.

"That is not what you wished?"

"I had thought… You are the Duke of Erembour. Your marriage is rather a big deal, and if you invited him, I expect even the Prince Regent would attend."

Kane snorted. That was the last thing he needed. But she was correct. Prinny would attend if invited, which was why Kane had no intention of inviting him. "I had wanted to be married quickly and without spectacle."

"You are Duke Erembour. You cannot do anything without spectacle."

"More truth to that than I wish." He eased her into his office and closed the door behind them. Aurora glanced at it, and he lifted her hands to his lips. "My staff are discreet, or they would not work for me. They will do no further damage to your reputation."

"It's so ingrained, isn't it? Worrying about being alone with you. Worrying about how others perceive my actions. I look forward to the day that stops."

Her words warmed him in a way he hadn't thought possible. "Aurora, I…" He couldn't bring himself to say it. "I want you to be happy. What is it that you desire?"

"I foolishly want to have a huge celebration with all of our friends and family. The church filled, and a lovely wedding breakfast afterward. I want everyone to enjoy the day with us."

"That sounds dreadful. Everyone would be staring at us with no way to escape."

Lady Aurora smiled. "They would be wishing us well."

Maybe a few. The rest would be saying horrible things about him and what he had done to force her to marry him. But that was not what disturbed him. Three days he could wait to marry her, but three weeks?

And during that time, he would have no right to protect her. No right to be by her side. That would all fall to Duke Aegir.

Damn society.

And she might be carrying his child. If anything happened to him, he could not guarantee Aurora and their child would be cared for and safe.

He wanted that. Needed it.

"I am concerned that such a celebration will expose you. We would have to open up the house to a great many people, and that involves risks. Until I can marry you, I have no right to care for you. No right to protect you."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Your safety and happiness mean everything to me."

"They do?"

He brushed his lips over hers. "Never doubt it. If you wish for an elaborate wedding, you shall have it."

"Perhaps we can have a grand party for our first anniversary instead."

He sensed her disappointment, and he was surprised. The special license would have saved her public censure, would have allowed her to quietly marry him and preserve her reputation without having to face society's harsh criticism.

After a time, a short one, they would forget. She would be a duchess, his duchess, and the ramifications they would face for hurting her would not be worth the gossip.

But she didn't wish for that.

She wanted a glorious day to celebrate her wedding, as any bride would.

A frown furrowed his brow.

Was she not sad she had to marry him?

Aurora gently brushed her fingers across his forehead. "What has earned me such a pensive expression?"

"I want to deprive you of nothing. You deserve a grand affair, and I want there to never be any doubt that you are my wife. I want to flaunt it before every man and woman in England."

"I didn't know you had a dramatic side."

Kane touched his lips to hers and enjoyed the way her body melted against his as she ceded her mouth to him. "I don't. But I do have a ruthless one. I will marry you twice. Once by special license and again in front of king and country."

"Is that allowed?"

"I am the Duke of Erembour. Of course it is. And I am marrying the same woman."

Lady Aurora smiled, the beautiful genuine smile that made his chest ache.

"I will make certain the Banns are read this Sunday. We will marry once I have the license, and again on the third Sunday after they are read."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes," Kane said. If it brought a smile like that to her face, he

would endure a lot more than a crowded church and reception.

Aurora hugged him tightly. “Thank you. I have so much to do between now and then.”

“Make use of my housekeeper and her staff.”

“Of course.” Lady Aurora stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him. “Thank you for understanding.”

She hurried out of the room to begin planning the blasted wedding, and he watched her go.

No, he didn’t understand why she wanted the grand affair, but she did, so she would have it.

He was a fool.

A fool subject to the Vestra curse.

And a fool that had less than three weeks to find the Ouroboros and cut off its head.

Chapter 22

Aurora spent the day planning for her wedding. She had three weeks and much to do, but it helped distract her from her worry for her brother, her own life, and Kane.

And Kane's staff proved to be just as helpful and reliable as he'd promised.

She hadn't forgotten Kane's promise to teach her to shoot a pistol or to ride astride, but the day slipped away from her before she had a chance to ask him about either. As she pushed aside the wedding breakfast menu she'd been working through, a commotion in the front hall drew her attention.

Aurora pushed back from the desk to investigate, but the housekeeper blocked her path to the door. "Please, milady, wait until we hear that it is safe."

"No one would be so bold as to attack Riverwood. It's a fortress."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed anything to happen to you. You are to be the Duchess of Erembour."

Aurora's gaze dropped to the carpet. She knew. All of Kane's staff probably knew he was only marrying her to save her reputation. Not that they would have expected anything different from Duke Erembour, and not that it was possible to keep secrets from the staff in a large house like this, but it still stung.

The housekeeper's gaze softened, though she didn't move from the doorway. "Milady, His Grace never does anything he does not wish to do."

"You know why…" Aurora swept her hand across the piles of lists.

"Never," the housekeeper repeated, and the woman's unswerving stare locked with Aurora's.

Aurora blinked, but it did sound like Duke Erembour. He never did anything unless it suited him.

But it if that were true, then it would mean he truly wanted to marry her, that he wasn't simply going through with this because it was what was expected.

She almost laughed at herself.

Lord Kane Vestra never did anything because it was expected.

Still, he needed a wife.

Perhaps he did want to marry her, but because it was a convenient way to check a very inconvenient thing off his list. After all, she could bear him heirs as well as any other lady could. And she knew how to run a household. He wouldn't need a chatelaine.

The housekeeper patted Aurora's arm as she guided her away from the door. "The only way to hurt him is through you, so you must take care."

Before Aurora could ask her what she meant, the door to the room they were working in burst open. The housekeeper appeared to be reaching for something under her skirts when a young man dropped into a low bow.

"Duke Erembour is searching for you, milady."

The housekeeper nodded. "Follow Noah. He will take you to His Grace."

Kane was sending for her. That meant he had news, and it was most likely bad.

Aurora swallowed the lump in her throat and raced after the young man. Riverwood was still a maze to her, but Noah brought her back to the elegant office lined with books. It smelled of leather and paper, an office of business. The thick rugs, rich woods, and crystal lamps spoke of wealth and power.

Kane stood in the center of it, his head bent as he discussed something with an older gentleman.

Noah bowed and backed out of the room.

"Your Grace," Aurora said as she dropped into a curtsey. She didn't want him to think she was listening in to his conversation, even though she was certain he'd been aware of her presence in the hall.

She pressed her lips together to keep from saying more, and she prayed no one else could hear the pounding in her chest.

Kane dismissed the older gentleman, then turned to her and took both of her hands in his. Ice balled in Aurora's stomach and flowed out to her limbs.

"We believe your brother may have been injured after we parted ways with him."

Aurora tightened her hold on Kane's hands. "Where is he now?"

"A half-day's hard ride from here."

She silently berated herself for leaving Francis, for having spent the night in Kane's arms while her brother had been alone and hurt. She fought back the surge of guilt. "I have to go to him. I must-"

Kane lifted her hands to his lips, quieting the swell of emotion within her enough that she turned her face up to him. "I believe it is a trap to lure you out of Riverwood. I believe our opponents learned just

how difficult you are to get at here, so they changed their tactics. They are trying to lure you out to kill you."

"I can't just leave Francis!"

"I have sent men to bring him here."

"Please, Kane, I have to go to him. Please."

"I am telling you this so you don't overhear it, or so that the villains don't manage to filter the information to you and send you off on some goose chase alone and unprotected." His breath tickled her fingers. "I cannot lose you."

"You will easily replace me with an orphan and a chatelaine," Aurora whispered. "I'm little more than a convenience to you, but I'm the only sister he has. I need to be with him."

Kane blanched at her words, and Aurora yanked away from him and fled into Riverwood. She needed to escape, to get to Francis. He was her brother and the only close family she had.

If she lost him…

Tears burned her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. It was easy to get lost in Riverwood, too easy.

Her feet took her to the duchess suite, the room she'd shared with Kane the previous night.

He'd been so gentle, so tender, nothing like what she had expected. She'd actually been looking forward to spending the night with him again. And his urgency to marry her by special license while still giving her the wedding she wanted later had warmed her.

She was a fool.

He didn't love her and never would.

While she was marrying him because she loved him, he was marrying her because he needed an heir. At least he knew how to make her enjoy creating that heir, but once that was taken care of, he may never sleep beside her again.

The thought left her cold and empty.

To love and not be loved in return might be worse than marrying for convenience. At least then there were no expectations, no hopes.

Aurora balled her fists and turned away from the room.

The book Francis had given her caught her attention, and she clutched it to her chest as she turned from the room and stumbled deeper into Riverwood.

~

Kane let Aurora go.

For the moment.

His staff would not allow her to leave Riverwood.

Duke Erembour took control of the situation, organizing the defense of Riverwood as well as making arrangements with his men to bring Duke Aegir back to the manor.

Men that had once been part of His Royal Majesty's most elite counter-espionage force.

Now they served Kane.

He had more than a few uses for them, but this was far more personal than any he'd ever had before. And far more important.

He needed to find Duke Aegir and bring him back alive and as unharmed as possible.

For Aurora.

And for himself.

But with so many of his trusted retainers out retrieving Duke Aegir, it would leave Aurora more vulnerable. He needed to oversee her protection himself.

While he wanted to give her the space she needed, he also wanted to keep her safe.

His need to keep her safe won.

A few discreet inquiries with his staff, and Kane found her sitting in the center of the portrait gallery, a book clutched to her chest. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she stared at the austere and haughty faces surrounding her.

"I would ignore them," Kane said. "They were all arrogant bastards if my father and I are any indication."

Aurora turned to stare up at him. "Your Grace," she whispered.

"Earlier today, you called me by my Christian name, as you do your brother. What happened?"

"That was inappropriate of me. I'm sorry, Your Grace."

He would not let her push him away. Whatever the Ouroboros Society had done to her brother would not change what was between them.

He wouldn't let it.

But he didn't know how to stop it, didn't know what to say to her to bring her back to him. Yes, they should be worried, but he wanted her to rely on him, to trust him.

More than that, he wanted her to love him.

"Aurora," he whispered, but he had no words.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. I so wanted…" She shook her head. "It doesn't matter what I want. Like Ophelia, so much has been decided for me."

Her words stung. "If you got to choose, what is it that you would want?"

She stared up at him, and this time, she couldn't hold back the tears. "You really want to know?"

He braced himself for her rejection, but he dipped his head. "Yes. The last time you asked me for something, I gave it to you."

"I suppose you did." She stared down at the book in her arms. "I want my parents to still be alive. I want my brother to be alive, happy, and untouched by whatever happened in France. I want my mother to be here to help me plan the most amazing wedding, and my father to cry as he walks me down the aisle and gives me away."

Kane wanted to reach for her, to comfort her, but he could give her none of the things she requested.

Nothing other than her brother.

"I will see to it that Duke Aegir is brought here and returned to health."

She closed her eyes as her tears dripped across her cheeks and stained the book's cover. "I wish whoever had shot through my bedroom window back at the Langford's had not been such a lousy shot."

"Don't say that! Don't ever say that." Kane knelt on the floor beside Aurora and gathered her into his arms.

"If they had succeeded, my brother would be hale and whole now. I would trade my life for Francis's."

"No." The one word filled the gallery, and Aurora startled in his arms.

"But-"

"You are far too important for that. There's a reason Francis and I have done all we have to protect you."

"But it's because of me Francis is hurt. Because of me that you are stuck marrying out of a sense of honor. And it's my stupidity that has me in love with a man who will never love me back."

Kane froze, and he felt as if the slightest breeze would shatter him. "You are in love with someone?"

She stared up at him and pressed her lips together. "It doesn't matter."

"Who? I won't cause him harm." Kane hoped he wouldn't. But if she did love someone, why hadn't she said something? He could think of no one who wouldn't have wanted to marry her.

Unless he was already married.

Aurora shook her head. "Of course you won't. You're not going to harm yourself."

"Me?" he breathed, and for a moment, he felt as if his heart had stopped beating. "But that's not possible."

"I wish that were true."

Kane pulled her hard against. "You can't possibly love me."

“You need to redefine what you consider possible.”

Kane brushed his lips over her forehead and stared down into her beautiful blue eyes. “It is a curse of Vestra men to fall in love. One I have tried hard to avoid.”

“And you’ve succeeded admirably.”

“No, I haven’t. I love you, Aurora, and I have for a long time.”

She stared up at him. “You… do?”

It was too late to turn back, too late to deny the truth. And doing so might cost him far more than the Vestra curse would. “I went to France to escape it when I first sensed the affliction. To escape the girl that I tormented with frogs so she would talk to me or commanded me to ask her to dance. But when I came home, the curse was more powerful than ever. Then she offered to help me find a bride.”

Aurora’s eyes widened. “I never knew, never suspected. Why didn’t you say something, or at least try to court me? You know why I commanded you to ask me to dance, don’t you?”

“I figured it was out of kindness.”

She stroked his cheek. “I wish I were so altruistic. Despite my father’s warnings, I was infatuated with you. I desperately wanted you to stop tormenting me with frogs and notice me, but you never did.”

“I noticed, but how could someone as warm and full of light as you ever…” He framed her face in his hands and kissed her. “It doesn’t matter how, as long as it is.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, Kane.”

“Tell me again.”

She laughed and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I love you, Kane.”

“Now, we just need to find your brother and get married.”

She grinned and tightened her arms around him.

Footsteps at the end of the hall had them both turning, and dread pooled in Kane’s stomach.

The man that stood there was not a member of his staff, and that could mean only one this.

The Ouroboros had found them.

Chapter 23

Aurora felt Kane tense beside her, then he eased her behind him.

"No sudden moves," the man at the end of the hall said as he withdrew a pistol. His words were soft and lightly accented, though Aurora could not identify the accent. "Now the woman will bring me the book."

"No," Kane said.

"She will bring me the book, or I will shoot you both."

"You have a single shot. You might hit me."

"I will hit you."

"You might not." Kane's voice was as cold as an Alpine glacier and gave away not an ounce of emotion. "Either way, you will have alerted everyone in Riverwood. It is doubtful you will escape alive, and the other ends of the snake have already been severed."

The man paused. "You are bluffing."

"I cut off the tail when he attacked my carriage. The head was severed by Duke Aegir who is currently on his way back to Riverwood. It is why you have not heard from him."

Aurora was not certain if Kane told the truth or if he was bluffing, but it was clear that their attacker didn't know if Kane was bluffing either.

"Give me the book."

"What book?" Kane asked.

The man pointed at the children's fairy stories her brother had given her.

"You have the wrong book. Those are children's stories," Aurora said.

Duke Erembour nudged the book, and it fell open to the story that had a picture of the boy with leather wings that reminded Aurora of him.

Kane paused as he glanced at the page, then nudged it so it opened to another story and another image.

"This is not a book of children's fairytales," he murmured. "This is a list of English agents. Where did this come from?"

"It matters not to me which Englishman sold you out," the

Ouroboros agent said. “I was sent to retrieve it from the dogs who stole it and eliminate any who saw it.”

Horror spread through Aurora. The book she’d read every night, the tales that had sounded familiar yet foreign… They were stories of those that had served England.

Pictures combined with histories that could help identify each of them.

Kane tensed in front of her as she stared down at the book.

The golden angel with the idyllic upbringing that had been corrupted by the black-winged demon was her brother.

It wasn’t a story of choice and moral consequences.

It was a way to identify men the French wanted to kill.

And Aurora had read through it a dozen times or more.

Now that she understood, the stories and pictures became men she knew, some she had danced with, others she had attended dinner parties with. And through all the pages there was the black-winged demon with green eyes.

Lord Kane Vestra.

Aurora swallowed as she stared down at the book she had spent so many nights reading. Her brother had meant it as a kindness, but it was a monstrosity. A sinister tool, one that would be used to hunt down and destroy those that had already given so much.

Kane never flinched as he stared at the other man. “Take the book and run, Aurora. Whoever created that is a traitor, and Ouroboros will use it to exact revenge on the men who served England.”

Aurora’s gaze fell to the pistol the strange man wielded. One shot, and she would be dead.

But she would risk everything, as her brother had.

As Kane had.

As so many others had.

If she had to trade her life to save them, she would.

Aurora clutched the book to her chest and sprinted through the gallery of paintings.

A single shot fired behind her, and she yelped, but she didn’t stop running.

There was no pain, so she was either already dead or she hadn’t been his target.

Aurora closed her mind.

She couldn’t bear to think of it.

Of all Kane had already sacrificed.

Of all he might have just sacrificed.

She thought of the black-winged man in so many of the pictures.

Taunting. Tempting. Luring.

It was him and not him.

A parody of him.

Aurora clutched the book to her chest. He had just told her he loved her, given her that which she most wanted.

A part of her wondered if it was real or if he just wanted to make her happy.

They were one and the same, she realized. The only reason he would want to make her happy was because he loved her.

Kane had to survive this, and so did she. They couldn't have just found each other only to lose each other in the next breath.

Aurora swallowed back the burning in her lungs and throat as she skidded down another hallway and sprinted through the twisting maze that was Riverwood.

She heard shouts and screams behind her, but she ignored it as she fled through the halls. She wasn't certain where was safe other than away from the man.

Aurora wished she would have spent the day learning to shoot a pistol rather than planning a wedding.

She had never thought she'd need the lessons.

Even so, she would not let them have the book. Not let them know who all the men that had served behind enemy lines were.

And if Kane had died to give her the chance to escape, she would not let his death be in vain.

She knuckled away the tears threatening to overtake her.

Kane and her brother could both be dead, but she wasn't, and she would protect the rest of the people in the book.

To do that, she had to destroy it.

There were numerous fires throughout Riverwood to warm the massive manor in the damp spring, but none of them would already be burning hot enough to consume the book.

She would have to throw it in the fireplace, stoke the fire, and wait for the flames to consume it.

It was risky to stop running for so long, but after all her brother and Kane had already given, she could do no less.

Her feet brought her back to the duke and duchess's suites.

There would be a fire burning in both hearths, but once she entered, there would be no way out except back through the main hall.

So be it.

The book had to be destroyed.

Chapter 24

Aurora had no idea if the man with the strange accent was following her or not, but he would come after her. He needed the book and to erase all witnesses.

He would come.

But when he found her, she would have already destroyed the book.

She had to.

Aurora sprinted into Kane's room, shut and locked the door behind her. She slid a chair under the handle, then did the same with the door that connected his room to the duchess's chambers.

Her fingers shook as she tossed the book into the hearth and watched the faint flames lick around it. But they only charred the edges of the book. The fire simply wasn't hot enough to consume it.

Her windpipe constricted as she forced herself to stay calm and think. The book was paper, thick paper bound in leather, but it was still paper.

It had to burn.

With the right help.

Her gaze fell to the oil lamp on Kane's desk.

They were not going to get the book.

Aurora heard footsteps in the hall as she struggled with the oil lantern, her hands still shaking as she finally got it open. She used the fire poker to get the book back out of the hearth, then flipping it open, she doused the pages in oil and tossed it onto the fire.

The flames leapt up, devouring the book and filling the room with an acrid smoke.

If the Ouroboros agent didn't already know she was in there, he did now.

Someone tried the handle on the door, then slammed against it with the weight of a grown man.

Aurora stared at the book a moment as the oil-soaked pages burned.

She had done that, at least. They wouldn't get the book.

Now they were coming for her.

She grabbed the fire poker, then rummaged through Kane's armoire and withdrew an elegant and expensive box.

Dueling pistols.

She shuddered as she withdrew the box and her fingers fumbled with the latch.

The man pounded against the door again, harder this time, causing the whole door to shake.

The pistols weren't loaded, and Aurora had no idea how to load them. Not that the Ouroboros agent would know that. Maybe he would think she was as competent as a member of the Erembour staff.

The door shuddered under the punishing blows, the heavy oak splintering as the entire door frame cracked and the man ripped it from its hinges.

Aurora trembled as she stood in front of the fireplace, the unloaded pistol in her hands as the flames billowed behind her.

"The book is gone," Aurora whispered. "You won't be able to use it to hurt anyone else."

The man stared at her and uttered an expletive in French, then drew an evil-looking blade. "But you read the stories, yes? You know them, remember them. So you will come with me. You will be the book, tell the stories to my masters."

"I only flipped through the book. They were children's stories, and I was saving them for my children."

"You are lying."

Aurora swallowed hard as she stared at the pistol in her hands, then at the man.

He would torture her to get the secrets of the book, then kill her. She didn't want to imagine the things he would do to her.

Her hands shook as he approached, and she cursed herself for not knowing how to load a pistol. For not being able to protect herself or those she loved.

But the acrid smoke from the book whispered she had at least done that.

And the man didn't have her yet.

He was wary, slowly pacing toward her. He didn't know the pistol wasn't loaded, but Aurora had no idea how much longer she could bluff.

"Stay away from her." Kane's voice was strong and sure, even as blood dripped down his arm and stained the floor. His shirt hung on him, and his bloody arm was tucked into its folds.

The Ouroboros man growled and turned toward Kane. "Why will you not stay down? You, who have cost so many lives already!"

The man lunged at Kane, and the wicked blade slashed through the air.

Aurora pulled the trigger though the pistol wasn't loaded, and a shot fired.

She startled as the man fell over, crimson welling across his chest and back. He toppled to the floor, the knife clattering to the ground.

Kane dropped his pistol, raced across the room, and pulled Aurora into his good arm.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

She clung to him as tears spilled over her cheeks. "The book. I destroyed the book." She pointed at the fire.

"Yes. And now the only ones that know you've read it are dead."

She nodded as he held her close.

"Is it over?" she asked.

"For us, yes. I will tell my superiors at Whitehall all that has happened. They will need to determine who made the book and how they passed it to the French, but our part is over."

She stared at the blood that soaked his shirt and now her gown. "Are you injured?"

Kane touched his forehead to hers. "Nothing that won't heal. I still have you, and that's all that matters. For a moment, I thought…" He closed his eyes as emotion choked off his words.

"My dark angel," she whispered. "I love you."

"I love you, Aurora, and I always will."

Kane glanced down at the man on the floor, then he led Aurora out of the room.

She didn't look back as the book burned.

She had all she needed beside her.

Aurora had made a choice, and she had chosen love.

Epilogue

Three weeks passed in the what felt like moments.

Francis and Kane were both almost fully recovered. The bullet had grazed Kane's shoulder, and Francis's injuries turned out to be a sprained shoulder and a gash across his forehead that had looked far worse that it was.

Despite both of their protestations that they would be fine, Aurora had insisted that they rest and recover fully at Riverwood.

Aurora was thrilled to have her brother walk her down the aisle to give her away to the man she loved.

To the man she would have died to protect.

The man that would have given his life to protect her.

Many still whispered about the circumstances around their unusual engagement, but people would always whisper.

He was Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour. An intense man, feared, respected.

And she loved him just as he was.

Kane slid an arm around her as he surveyed their guests enjoying the wedding breakfast. "Duchess Erembour," he whispered. "I am not sure I will ever tire of calling you that."

The genuine affection in his words arrowed through her, and Aurora smiled up at him. "I love you, Lord Kane Vestra, Duke of Erembour, and I am so happy to be your duchess."

His lips quirked into a smile. "As I love you, Lady Aurora Vestra, Duchess of Erembour. And I am so happy you agreed to be my duchess."

She paused as she stared out across the crowded gathering, and Lady Catherine raised a glass to them both.

Kane dipped his head in acknowledgement, and Aurora smiled.

Lady Catherine was a powerful but restrained dowager, and she could only wonder at what had passed between her and Kane.

She would ask him later.

For the moment, she would enjoy the day surrounded by family and friends.

And she would enjoy the rest of her life beside the man she loved

and who loved her.

~

I hope you enjoyed reading Rescued by the Duke as much as I enjoyed writing it!

If you have a moment, please sign up for my mailing list.

I only use it to send notifications of new books, freebies, or things I think might interest you. And to say thank you for signing up, I will give you a **free** book: The Duke's Homecoming Wish. This is not a chapter or a teaser, but the ***whole book***, as my thanks to you.

And if you have an extra moment, I would really appreciate it if you would leave me a review. Just a sentence or two would really help me. Thank you again!

Also by Elizabeth Brighton

Free Book

The Duke's Homecoming Wish

Dukes, spies, and lies

Caught with the Earl

Copyright © 2020 by Elizabeth Brighton

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.